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ABSTRACT

Noting that parenting is one of the most difficult and demanding challenges people face, this book integrates extensive clinical experience, up-to-date research, and personal experience to help parents manage hard-to-handle children more effectively. The book explains hard-to-handle behaviors and helps parents understand what might be normal childhood behavior and what needs to be addressed differently. The book encourages parents to use a balanced approach to discipline, encompassing positive strategies to prevent problems and reinforce desirable behavior, as well as discouraging inappropriate behavior. Following an intrcduction, the book's chapters are: (1) "The Most Important Job in the World"; (2) "Understanding Hard-to-Handle Behavior"; (3) "Caring for Yourself as a Parent"; (4) "Becoming an Authoritative Parent"; (5) "Nurturing and Supporting Your Child"; (6) "Providing Direction and Structure for Your Child"; (7) "Responding to Your Child's Behavior"; (8) "Using a Home-Economy Program"; (9) "Helping Your Child Keep Up the Good Work"; (10) "Dealing with Specific Hard-To-Handle Situations"; (11) "Encouraging Sibling and Peer Relationships"; and (12) "Helping Your Child Succeed at School." A brief final chapter summarizes key points in the book. The book concludes with a list of resources for parents and for children. (Contains a 95-item bibliography.) (HTH)

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HOW TO HANDLE A hard-to-handle kid

A Parents' Guide to Understanding and Changing Problem Behaviors

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C. Drew Edwards, Ph.D.

How to Handle a Hard-to-Handle Kid

A Parents' Guide to Understanding and Changing Problem Behaviors

by C. Drew Edwards, Ph.D.

Foreword by Arthur D. Anastopoulos, Ph.D.

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For Barbara, Christi, and Stephanie

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As the resources section attests, a number of experts have provided a wealth of information on effectively handling child behavior problems, but several stand out as having been especially influential in my thinking. I'm grateful to Diana Baumrind for articulating the concept of authoritative parenting and her personal communications with me on the subject. Thomas Gordon's work in Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) has been extremely useful, and his discussions of effective listening and problem-solving have been particularly instructive. Finally, Russell Barkley, Rex Forehand, and Gerald Patterson have written about childhood oppositional, defiant, and aggressive behavior from a behavioral and social learning theory viewpoint in a way that improves understanding of the behaviors and points to effective disciplinary approaches.

I'm grateful for the careful reading of the text by Sue Hendricks and William Sloan, Ph.D. Sue is an editor with the *Winston-Salem Journal* and provided helpful comments on both style and substance. Bill is a Winston-Salem child psychologist and fellow faculty member at Wake Forest and a close friend. His observations challenged me to think carefully about what I was saying and to communicate it more clearly.

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Foreword

Parenting is one of the most difficult and demanding challenges people face. Even under the best of circumstances, most people become parents with very little preparation. Colleges and high schools offer few courses on parenting, and those that are available are typically limited to classroom discussions rather than hands-on experiences. Most of us learn about parenting through our own life experiences. And most of what we know about parenting comes from our own observations and memories of how our parents parented us. When our children don't seem to fit the shape of our expectations, when we struggle with difficult, challenging, and defiant behaviors day after day, we need to reach outside ourselves for help. This book can be a wonderful start.

Clinicians and researchers have written volumes over the years on how to deal with difficult children. Advice from clinicians, however, often lacks an awareness of the advances that researchers have made. And researchers often fail to translate their knowledge into practical, everyday advice that parents can use.

In *How to Handle a Hard-to-Handle Kid*, Dr. C. Drew Edwards bridges the gap between clinicians and researchers. Drawing on his extensive clinical experience, his academic background, his up-to-date knowledge of clinical child development literature, and his own experience as an engaged parent, Edwards has written a book for parents that offers page after page of practical, research-based advice.

In clear and convincing terms, Edwards explains hard-to-handle behaviors and helps parents understand what might be normal childhood behavior and what needs to be addressed differently. He draws on cognitive and behavior therapies to guide parents in becoming mentally and emotionally prepared to carry out difficult parenting tasks. Above everything else, he encourages parents to use a balanced approach to discipline, encompassing positive strategies to prevent problems and reinforce desirable behavior, as well as discouraging inappropriate behavior. Numerous examples of parents applying these techniques to specific problem behaviors

help readers come away from the book with practical steps they can take immediately.

This well-organized, clearly written, and informative book skillfully integrates what extensive clinical experience, up-to-date research, and personal experience can teach about managing hard-to-handle children more effectively. Parents looking for help in raising their children to become competent, caring adults will find the necessary guidance and reassurance in this book. And professionals who work with parents will also find valuable advice within these pages.

ARTHUR D. ANASTOPOULOS, PH.D
Associate Professor of Psychology
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Introduction

Let's face it: everyone is hard to handle at times. We become irritable, ignore requests, refuse to cooperate, and lash out at others. Hard-to-handle behaviors like these are a normal part of growing up for most children, especially when they're very young. But some children act out, argue, disobey, and throw temper tantrums more frequently than others. If you're parenting one of these high-maintenance kids, you probably find yourself exhausted and unsure of where to turn. Sometimes it feels like nothing you try works.

If you parent a hard-to-handle child, you're right to reach out for help. Aggressive and disruptive behaviors can interfere with normal child development. Children who are intense and difficult sometimes fail to develop important life skills, such as building healthy relationships with friends and adults. If you don't get a handle on hard-to-handle behaviors while children are young, their difficulties can last into adulthood. That's why this book focuses on children from about age 3 to age 12.

Although effectively parenting challenging children may be difficult, it's not an impossible task. We can learn to understand why hard-to-handle children act the way they do. We can learn about an approach known as *authoritative parenting* to help us balance the direction and structure we give our children with nurturing and support. And we can learn more effective parenting strategies that will help us guide our children toward becoming more responsible, competent, and content.

This book won't give you a magic key for turning your child around, but it will help you recognize some steps that you can take to deal more effectively with your child's behavior.

- You'll learn more about disruptive, hard-to-handle behavior. What's considered normal? What's not? And why are some kids harder to handle than others?
- You'll discover ways to nurture yourself and reduce the stress and effort you expend dealing with your hard-to-handle child.

- You'll explore the idea of authoritative parenting—learning to balance discipline and structure with support and encouragement.
- You'll learn about the features that make discipline work and many effective strategies you can use when responding to difficult behaviors.
- You'll find out how to start and use a home-economy program, a systematic method of giving your child frequent and consistent feedback.
- You'll learn how to help your child gradually assume greater responsibility for his or her own behavior.
- You'll read concrete tips for dealing with the most typical hard-to-handle behaviors and practical suggestions for helping your child develop healthy relationships with friends and siblings.
- You'll find effective ways of encouraging your child's success at school.

Throughout the book, you'll read examples and find resources you can turn to for more information.

Some of the methods you'll read about will be new to you. Some may sound strange or time-consuming at first. But if you use these suggested strategies consistently, you'll expend less energy dealing with your child's problem behaviors. Effectively parenting hard-to-handle kids requires being consistent. Use this book as a resource and refer to it when you need guidance and reinforcement.

As you practice and become more comfortable with these skills, you *will* see a difference. Instead of crying out in frustration about your hard-to-handle kid, you'll feel good about your efforts and your child's progress.

CHAPTER 1

The Most Important Job in the World

Would you apply for this job?

WANTED:

Mature adults for 24-hour, seven-days-a-week duty. Must be patient, determined, and self-motivated. Will need to work with people who are at times totally dependent, demanding, and unreasonable. Duties include shopping, financial management, housekeeping, counseling, cooking, and emergency first aid. Must provide frequent transportation. Lifetime commitment but no formal education required. No job training provided. No monetary compensation, but generous fringe benefits.

What? You wouldn't? But since you're reading this book, chances are you already have the job. And if your child is hard-to-handle, the job probably has you!

Under the best of circumstances, parenting is tough. Although it's the most important job in the world, parents usually have no training, and most of us come into the position with little understanding

of what it's about. Yet, from day one, we learn through experience and persevere through the challenges of life with children.

While most parents talk about sleep deprivation, juggling schedules, and trying to answer 20,000 "why?" questions a day, parents whose children are hard-to-handle sometimes ask themselves why they even became parents in the first place. Not only do their children say no to requests, but they're disruptive, defiant, and sometimes downright aggressive. So, while other parents are marveling at the wonder of their kids, some parents find the fringe benefits—the smiles, the hugs, the quiet bedtime stories—overpowered by scowls, stomping, and loud objections.

What's a Hard-to-Handle Kid Like?

Since all kids can be difficult from time to time, parents often wonder what's normal. All children irritate or disappoint, chafe against parental authority, and assert their individuality on occasion. That's what kids do, because they're constantly learning and exploring the boundaries of their world. They need to take risks as they find their way in the world. But how do parents know if a child's behavior signals normal developmental growth or an unusual level of problems?

There aren't any hard-and-fast rules, but if you have experience with other children, whether your own or someone else's, you might have some basis for comparison. You can also read about the typical behavior at different child developmental levels (see page 26). This will help you better gauge whether your child is more strongly and frequently angry, argumentative, defiant, and otherwise hard-to-handle than most other kids at that developmental stage.

Try looking at your own feelings and reactions to your child's behavior. This is often your best measure of the level of difficulty.

- Do you frequently feel annoyed and taken advantage of by your youngster?
- Do you often react with anger and frustration?

- Are you looking for strategies to help you regain a sense of balance?

Seeking help in dealing with your child's behaviors is the first step toward positive change for both of you.

What's Normal? What's Hard-to-Handle?

How do most hard-to-handle children act? Anger, arguing, disobedience, irritability, defiance, vengefulness, failing to accept responsibility for actions—all are common hard-to-handle behaviors. Children who show a pattern of these actions may be referred to as *oppositional-defiant*.[1] Other children have more serious problem behaviors, such as cruelty and aggression. These are addressed further on pages 8–9.

	Normal Kids	Moderately Hard-to-Handle Kids	Strongly Hard-to-Handle Kids
Number of Problems	A few	Several	Many
Problems Occur	Infrequently	Frequently	Very frequently
Intensity	Mild to moderate	Moderate	Strong
Where Problems Occur	Most often in one place (at home but not at child care or school, or vice versa)	Usually in more than one setting	Usually in many settings—at home and in other places.
Triggers	Stress and new developmental challenges may trigger problems but they typically last less than six months at a time	Stress and new developmental challenges may trigger new problems, and they may last six months or more	Stress and new developmental challenges may trigger new problems, and they usually last six months or more
Professional Help Required?	No	Maybe it's not necessary, but it can help.	Yes

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Are Boys More Hard-to-Handle Than Girls?

Although both boys and girls can be hard-to-handle, boys more often display the behaviors we think of as difficult: exuberant and sometimes aggressive physical activity, defiance, resisting authority. We also think of those behaviors as being "masculine." There are biological and social reasons for these differences. Boys and girls develop at different rates intellectually and physically. Girls develop fine motor skills and begin reading earlier than boys and tend to do better in school in the earlier grades. Boys, on the other hand, aren't rewarded at school for their visual and spatial skills and physical impulsiveness. Their frustration may rise when they're forced to sit quietly at their desks for much of the day.

And despite societal changes, parents still tend to raise sons and daughters differently. Parents, especially fathers, tend to engage in more rough-and-tumble play with boys and see girls as more vulnerable. They may more readily excuse aggressiveness and pushing limits by their sons as "boys will be boys." Also, while society has become more willing to accept that girls and women can be both nurturing and strong-willed, emotional and tough-minded, many boys and men are still locked-in to rigid gender roles that restrict the range of acceptable emotional expression. Girls are rewarded for sensitivity, tenderness, and compassion, while boys are encouraged to hold back on their emotions and hide their softer side and their need for affection and warmth. For some boys, anger is the most socially acceptable emotional reaction to frustration.

How Difficulties Escalate

According to Gerald Patterson, a psychologist at the Oregon Social Learning Center who has studied hard-to-handle kids extensively, problem behaviors usually escalate in a predictable progression: from disobedience to temper tantrums and, sometimes, to aggression. If difficult behaviors aren't dealt with effectively early on, children

may progress to more serious behaviors, such as chronic lying, stealing, and violence. And the risk increases the longer problems persist.

James, for example, is a pretty typical hard-to-handle kid. He's playing his favorite video game one evening, and Dad tells him it's time to take out the trash. James ignores his dad and continues playing. Dad says more sharply, "James, I said it's time to take out the trash!" This gets James's attention. "I'm still playing!" he yells, jumping up and stomping.

Dad, who's had a long, hard day, recognizes the temper tantrum. "You never do anything around here," he mutters, more to himself than to James, and takes out the trash himself.

By defying his dad, James got out of an unpleasant responsibility (taking out the trash) while continuing an activity he enjoyed (playing a video game). He's learned that all he has to do is take a few minutes out to pitch a fit. He's obviously used the tactic before and found that it's worth trying again. Defiant behavior is repeated because most of the time, it *works*.

Where Difficulties Can Lead

Over time, difficulties tend to escalate, and parents begin to feel powerless to influence their child. It becomes a vicious circle. When they try to overpower their child, the child reacts more strongly and powerfully than they do. Out of anger, resentment, guilt, or frustration, many parents begin to avoid their child in order to reduce conflict. They don't know *what* to do, so they step back, hoping the child will outgrow the difficulties.

But avoidance only makes things worse. When parents try to reduce conflict by avoiding their child, the child feels rejected. Coercive children experience many negative, rejecting responses to their behavior, and they may unconsciously start seeing themselves as "bad." They feel unlovable and act accordingly.

Many hard-to-handle children act out at child care, school, and other places outside the home as well, which only adds to the stress. And just like at home, this behavior leads to further rejection by other important people in their lives. They may not receive

invitations to classmates' parties, or neighbors may hold block parties when their families are on vacation.

Just as relationships deteriorate, academic performance also suffers because of behavior problems. It's not that hard-to-handle kids aren't capable students, but they often refuse to do what teachers ask of them. As they grow older, these kids are at risk of developing more serious school problems, such as failure, absenteeism, and truancy.

Parents, too, may feel isolated and inadequate, further affecting their relationship with their child. They may secretly think, "If it weren't for you, life would be more enjoyable. We'd have friends. I'd enjoy being with my family, instead of dreading it," and then feel even more guilty for their thoughts.

How More Serious Problems Develop

Imagine you're a rambunctious child. You feel rejected by your parents. Neighbors avoid you. Relatives no longer invite your family to get-togethers. Other kids don't want to play with you, and you're not doing very well in school either. What do you do?

Some of these children start acting out more. They may become aggressive bullies, fighting with other children. They regularly lie and cheat and may even steal or set fires. Some become cruel to animals or people. While not all hard-to-handle children act in these ways, such behaviors signal more serious trouble.

Warning Signs

If your child regularly shows several of these signs, seek professional help. They might indicate a serious conduct disorder.

- Bullying and threatening others
- Cruelty to animals
- Stealing
- Chronic lying
- Frequent aggression
- Cruelty to people
- Destructiveness
- Setting fires

During the preschool years, periodic aggression, destructiveness, and lying can be part of normal development. The difference between what's normal and what's not depends on a number of factors: Is the child under a great deal of stress? Do these behaviors happen only at home? Are they infrequent? Do they seem relatively mild in intensity? If so, you're likely dealing with normal behaviors. Young children, for example, may be unintentionally cruel to a pet because they don't understand their own relative strength. Supervising them and demonstrating how to be gentle can help children learn how to treat a pet. Likewise, parents can direct young children away from other disruptive actions such as bullying.

But when young kids act out more frequently, with more intensity, and outside of home, the behavior is not typical. And as children become older and presumably better understand the consequences of their behavior, the warning signs become more serious.

You need to become extremely concerned if you're seeing at least four behavioral warning signs occurring often with moderate to severe intensity. Strong aggression, cruelty, stealing, and setting fires are particularly worrisome. Professional help is clearly needed. A professional can evaluate the situation for psychological and biological factors and work directly with you and your child to reduce the problems (for help on finding professionals, see page 122). When severe difficulties exist, medication may help, particularly when your child also has hyperactive and impulsive behaviors.

What About ADHD?

Hard-to-handle behaviors frequently accompany attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADHD is a complex disorder of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. It has neurophysiological causes and may be genetically based. Children diagnosed with ADHD are often hard-to-handle, but not all children with hard-to-handle behaviors have ADHD. Children with ADHD often benefit from professional help and, sometimes, medication.

If you suspect that your child has significant problems with attention and self-control, this book can help, but it alone won't address all the issues of parenting these children. Please consult a physician or mental health professional who can assess your child.

Check It Out

All About Attention Deficit Disorder by Thomas W. Phelan (Glen Ellyn, IL: Child Management, 1996). This comprehensive guide gives parents the facts and resources they need to deal with ADD effectively.

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD). This national support organization has chapters all over the country. To find out more, contact:

CHADD
8181 Professional Place, Suite 201
Landover, MD 20785
1-800-233-4050
http://www.chadd.org

Taking Charge of ADHD: The Complete, Authoritative Guide for Parents by Russell A. Barkley, Ph.D. (New York: Guilford Press, 1995). This book guides and inspires parents who are raising children with ADHD.

What Happens as Hard-to-Handle Children Grow Up?

While growing up, most children learn to share and to ask for things rather than just take them. They enjoy give-and-take during their play, and you hear them say, "Okay, it's your turn now, and then it's mine."

Like other children, most hard-to-handle children *know* what these positive social behaviors are. If you asked your obstinate daughter, "How should you act when you're playing a game with others?" she'd most likely give the right answer: "Act nice, take turns, and follow the rules." But she doesn't necessarily translate that knowledge into behavior. Child psychologists have a standard test question: "What should you do if a smaller child starts hitting you?" One hard-to-handle child replied, "Do you want me to tell you what I *should* do or what I *would* do?"

While difficult children find that they can get what they want in the short term, they suffer consequences over time. Other children

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don't want to play with them, and adults give mainly negative feedback. Hard-to-handle children begin to feel isolated as others pull away, which contributes to their already low self-esteem, and they can find themselves in a cycle where behaviors become more and more troubling. The child feels rejected. The child becomes harder to handle. The child is rejected more, and the child acts out in even more upsetting ways, developing an antisocial attitude.

"The antisocial child perceives himself as a victim of a cruel and unjust world," according to child behavior expert Gerald Patterson. "Observations conducted in the home and in school show his perceptions are absolutely correct. He is not treated fairly by others. He receives more punishment and ridicule than do other members of the family. Compared to his normal peers, he is more likely to be picked on and less likely to be selected for group activities. His experiences are qualitatively different from those of normal peers."

Yet even the most hard-to-handle children need social support. So whom do they seek out when they can't get support elsewhere? They often gravitate toward "deviant peers," other kids who are like them: angry, noncompliant, and difficult to manage.

Strong relationships with other hard-to-handle kids often mean that these children miss out on experiences that help build positive social skills. In other words, hanging out with children who depend on intimidation and control to meet their needs and wishes only reinforces those behaviors. As hard-to-handle kids miss out on early opportunities to learn and practice the healthy skills of give-and-take, cooperation, and appropriate assertiveness, they spend more and more time with kids who don't value school and social success. The result can be problems with relationships throughout life and lack of motivation to succeed at school and elsewhere.

Frequent assaults on self-esteem and poor coping skills may lead to depression during adolescence and adulthood. Hard-to-handle teens and adults may not feel sad on the surface, but the way they act may deepen their distress. They may grow more irritable, lack motivation, feel hopeless, and have poor sleeping and eating habits; many abuse alcohol, drugs, or other substances. By

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age 18, up to 20 percent of all teenagers will have had at least one episode of significant depression.[4] It's reasonable to believe that the rate is higher in kids who haven't developed a strong social network and coping skills.

Even if many hard-to-handle children don't develop serious problems, research has found that difficult children tend to become difficult adults. Less education, less success at work, and problems with intimate relationships deeply affect their quality of life. Chronically hard-to-handle people seem to be at greater risk for alcohol and other substance abuse and for a variety of psychological disorders. These effects can have profound costs, not only for the individuals, but also their families and society at large.

There Is Hope

Although it's alarming to know what can happen to hard-to-handle children if they don't get help, parents do have the power to influence their children in positive ways. You can change how you respond to your difficult child. You can help break the cycle of rejection that may trigger the downward spiral. That's what this book is all about.

The hard-to-handle kid's dramatic, oppositional, and defiant actions are hard to miss. But even the most hard-to-handle child can be loving, thoughtful, and polite—more often than we realize. As we learn new strategies for dealing with problems, we'll likely learn to see the positive in our children as well.

And the good news is that solutions for many problems are available. You can learn strategies that will help you work with your child so that you both respond differently. Learning more productive parenting techniques won't completely wipe out disruptive behavior, but we have more control over our parenting than we do over some of the other forces that contribute to the problems, especially if we start early.

Notes:

1. American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 91–94.

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3. Patterson, G.R., J.B. Reid & T.J. Dishion. (1992). *Antisocial Boys*. Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing, 119–120.

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CHAPTER 2

Understanding Hard-to-Handle Behavior

Sometimes it's easy to understand why someone behaves a certain way. For example, someone who's had a death in the family may act depressed and distracted. Someone who's running late for work may snap at others. But the reasons for a behavior can't always be traced to a specific cause. Many factors work together to influence how people act.

Suppose you have a bad cold. You may feel less energetic and not think through things clearly. Do you stay home or go to work anyway? The action you take depends on many factors—your personality and tendencies, the job you do, your environment at work, your coworkers' reactions. All of these may play a role in your decision, consciously or unconsciously.

Children's actions are also influenced by many factors—major and minor, immediate and past, inherited and social. Researchers have studied these to determine which have the strongest effects and how they work together to influence behavior. Understanding the most important influences will help you understand some of your child's difficult behavior. These five influences are:

1. Temperament
2. Other biological characteristics
3. Parenting patterns
4. Family stress
5. Influences outside the family

Temperament

Most child development experts believe that our personalities are influenced by biological factors and we are born with certain behavioral tendencies. For example, some babies are born very active and emotionally intense. Others tend to be calm and low-key. Since we notice these differences so early in life, we think they result from nature (hereditary or other biological factors) rather than nurture (a child's experiences). The word *temperament* is often used to describe these behavioral styles that accompany us from the dark night of the womb into the bright light of the delivery room.

Temperament styles usually have an upside and a downside, depending on the circumstances. For example, intense, active people are often movers and shakers; they're great at getting things done. On the other hand, these people can be hard to live with because they often respond too emotionally and forcefully. People who are more easygoing may have the advantage of calm, smooth

relationships, but they may be less driven to accomplish things on their own. Certain behavioral tendencies also may be valued more at different times in a person's life. For example, while people admire assertiveness in adults, many prefer children to be calm and passive.

Check It Out

Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis Books, 1984). This book explains the 16 temperament types defined in the Myers-Briggs personality model and discusses how people's individual temperaments affect their relationships. The chapter on children and temperaments is particularly helpful.

But nature alone doesn't account for actions. Our natural tendencies are strengthened or weakened by our experiences. Throughout childhood and adolescence, our temperament and experiences work together to influence our adult personality traits. These traits reveal themselves in our thoughts, feelings, and actions in a number of situations, and they may be hard to change.

Many characteristics make up our unique personalities and affect our temperament. Think of these characteristics as our most *natural* way of behaving. We don't act in these ways all the time, nor do our personal tendencies necessarily fall into one extreme or the other. Like most other actions, they fall on a continuum. Here are 11 characteristics that illustrate different aspects of temperament.

1. Activity level. Each child is born with a different *activity level*. Some children seem naturally calm, while others are in constant motion. Highly active infants move around a lot whether they're awake, being bathed, or sleeping. When you go to wake them in the morning, you might find them sleeping at the other end of the bed. Babies who are less active don't move around as much. As children grow older, one child may run around a good deal, while another sits quietly for long periods of time looking at

a book. In elementary school, children with high activity levels tend to prefer rough-and-tumble play or outdoor activities. Those who are low on the activity scale tend to have more quiet or indoor interests.

2. Stimulation threshold. Some children react quickly to small stimulation; others need a stronger force to push them over the edge. Kids with a low *stimulation threshold* react strongly to minor events. For example, a child with a low pain threshold who gets pinched may cry about it for a long time, even if the pinch didn't leave a mark. These children may also be more sensitive to light, sound, and crowds. Kids who have a higher threshold, on the other hand, require much more stimulation in order to respond. They may tolerate stronger pain, or enjoy loud noise, bright lights, and boisterous social stimulation.

Children with a lower threshold may be more sensitive to others as well. They may notice subtle changes in other people's facial expressions, tones, or gestures and adjust how they act accordingly. Social rewards (such as saying, "Thank you for picking up your room") and mild punishments ("Because you pushed your little sister, you have to spend 10 minutes in your room") are often sufficient to improve behavior.

High-threshold children, in contrast, usually need much more direct feedback before they notice that something is amiss. Stronger social reinforcements (such as saying, "Thank you very much for picking up your room" in a louder voice with more expression), while providing concrete rewards (such as stickers or points toward a privilege), may be needed. Negative feedback also needs to be stronger and firmer, with a matching tone of voice. Keep in mind, however, that with any difficult children, punishments that are too strong, such as yelling and spanking, can create too much negative emotion, which is why harsh punishment usually ends up being ineffective and often makes matters worse.

3. Emotional intensity. Some children express stronger emotional responses than others. Children who are high in *emotional intensity* generally feel and express emotions strongly. These children

are very angry when they have to come in from play. They're very, very sad when their goldfish dies, and they're very happy when they get to stay up and watch a special TV show. Low-intensity children, on the other hand, may not only act more calm, but also experience life in a more relaxed way. These children don't display their feelings so openly or react emotionally. They're usually described as easygoing.

4. Outlook. There seem to be built-in differences in *outlook*—whether children respond to situations with a mostly upbeat, positive outlook or a more unpleasant, negative one. Children with a predominantly negative outlook cry, complain more often, and express greater anger about even mildly distressing events. Mostly positive kids, on the other hand, smile often, seem content with life, and deal with unpleasantness in a more relaxed manner. One's outlook as an optimist or a pessimist may have its roots in this temperament characteristic.

5. Regularity. We've all known children who seem to follow an internal schedule, and others whose lives seem much less regular. The highly *regular* child, from early in life, may have fairly predictable eating, sleeping, and even elimination habits. The *irregular* child is much more difficult to predict. For example, one child may be ready for bed at the same time every evening, while her sister may go to bed at 9:00 P.M. one evening, 7:30 P.M. the next. The regular child wants breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks at the same time each day. The less-predictable child may refuse to eat breakfast, eat a large lunch at noon, complain of starvation an hour later, and nibble at dinner. A temperamental tendency toward regularity or irregularity may be related to orderliness and organizational skills.

6. Attention span. Children with a short *attention span* may be distractible, finding that events easily interrupt or change the direction of an ongoing activity. Their attention is quickly diverted by both external events (a horn honking outside the window) and internal events (a daydream about flying into outer space).

Children with persistence, however, can stick with or return to a task in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. They may study their multiplication tables at length even though the radio is blasting and people are arguing in the next room. If the child even notices these distractions, the interruption is brief. The child stays on task for a long time, even if it's boring and takes effort.

Just as other temperament characteristics have both positive and negative sides, so does attention span. A baby with less attention can be easily distracted from hunger while a bottle is being heated. But as the baby grows older, this easy distractibility may become a liability. The child may find it difficult to concentrate on homework in a noisy room. Persistence, too, can be positive when a child sticks with a difficult project, such as memorizing words for a spelling bee. But when the child refuses to take out the garbage because he or she is so absorbed in a game, the frustrated parent may see the child as stubborn.

7. **Adaptability.** From infancy, children vary in their *adaptability*: how they react to new people or new situations. Some embrace changes quickly, while others avoid them and need more time. Some children are slow to warm up to new people and situations and aren't easily adaptable to such circumstances. Other children may initially withdraw but adapt in a relatively short period of time.

8. **Extroverted or introverted.** From early in life, children seem to have varying preferences for social contact. *Extroverted* children enjoy being with other people—they thrive on the energy of social stimulation and enjoy meeting new people. *Introverted* children tend to be more reserved. They're more likely to enjoy playing by themselves, and they prefer smaller groups of people to large crowds.

9. **Sensing or intuition.** As children start going to school, you may notice that they process information in different ways. This is the difference between sensing and intuition, traits that probably represent their experiences so far, as well as their inborn

temperamental style. *Sensing* people prefer to rely on the five senses for information about things around them. They tend to be practical, literal, and attentive to detail, especially if the detail is not too complicated. *Intuitive* people, on the other hand, are naturally inclined to be idealistic and to engage in what-if kinds of thinking. They pay attention to the big picture and may gloss over practical details. Intuitive thinkers operate on the basis of insight or a general gut feeling about their experiences.

10. Thinking or feeling. After taking in information, children evaluate it in different ways. Children who are *thinkers* lean toward making decisions on the basis of right and wrong and what works and what doesn't. They tend to reach conclusions based on facts and in fairly impersonal ways. Their sense of justice and fair play tends to be strong, and they may not naturally take their own or other people's feelings into account in evaluating many situations.

Children who are *feelers*, on the other hand, make decisions based on how people are affected. They seek a harmonious outcome that feels right. Their own and other people's values and preferences often influence their decisions. These children place higher priorities on pleasing others and keeping harmony rather than on playing things out by the book.

11. Judging or perceiving. This characteristic concerns how much structure and predictability a child needs in life. *Judging* individuals are organized and prefer closure in most circumstances. They like to plan their days and follow their plans. They find surprises disruptive. *Perceiving* people are naturally spontaneous and appear to go with the flow much of the time. These children enjoy surprises and may find planned schedules restrictive.

These judging and perceiving characteristics may be related to regularity (see page 19). People who are regular and predictable in their habits tend to be more orderly in their lives. Conversely, irregular individuals aren't tied to schedules and are usually more spontaneous in the way they act.

What's Your Child's Temperament?

Temperament characteristics are often described in extremes, but most people fall somewhere in between, although they may show a natural leaning toward one extreme or the other. Circle the number that best shows where you think your child falls on the continuum.

Low activity
Your child is laid-back and calm.

High activity
Your child is action-oriented and on the go, even while sleeping.

1	2	3	4	5

Low stimulation threshold
Your child notices even small amounts of pain, sound, or light, and doesn't like crowds.

High stimulation threshold
Your child can withstand large amounts of pain, adverse weather, and difficult situations.

1	2	3	4	5

Low intensity
Your child's emotions are usually quite even. Your child usually displays feelings in a low-key manner.

High intensity
Your child's emotions are strongly expressed and tend to be exaggerated.

1	2	3	4	5

Positive outlook
Your child tends to be upbeat, happy, content, and positive.

Negative outlook
Your child tends to complain, become upset, and see the negative side of life.

1	2	3	4	5

Regular
Your child tends to prefer a consistent daily schedule.

Irregular
Your child tends to prefer a more varied schedule.

1	2	3	4	5

Distractible
Your child's attention can easily be diverted to another activity.

Persistent
Your child has a long attention span that is not easy to break.

1	2	3	4	5

Adaptable
Your child is outgoing, sociable, and eager to try new things.

Slow to embrace change
Your child is cautious about new situations and changes in routines.

1	2	3	4	5

Extroverted
Your child thrives on social contact. He or she is outgoing and enjoys group activities more than playing alone.

Introverted
Your child is less outgoing and enjoys playing alone.

1	2	3	4	5

Sensing
Your child relies heavily on the five senses to process information.

Intuitive
Your child relies heavily on hunches and gut feelings to process information.

1	2	3	4	5

Thinking
Your child evaluates information on the basis of logic and a sense of what's right and wrong.

Feeling
Your child evaluates information on a case-by-case basis, with an eye toward making life with others harmonious.

1	2	3	4	5

Judging
Your child likes organization and closure. Your child enjoys planning and having a schedule.

Perceiving
Your child is spontaneous and enjoys open-ended situations and surprises.

1	2	3	4	5

After you have completed this for your child, do the exercise again. Think about the temperament characteristics *you* tend to have. When you finish, compare your child's temperament with your own. How are you similar? How are you different?

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All these temperamental factors interact with each other and with our children's experiences to influence their behaviors. When our children's temperament and our temperament as parents don't fit well, friction and misunderstanding are more likely.

According to child development researchers, a particular pattern of temperamental characteristics appears to set the stage for hard-to-handle behavior. A difficult child who is emotionally intense, often negative, irregular in daily routines, and slow to adapt to new people and situations places great demands on parents.

Plus, if parents and children have similar temperamental traits, the sparks can really fly. That's why it's important to understand our child's temperament, our own temperament, and how our temperaments together can help and hinder our relationship.

Sometimes our personality traits as parents fit well with our child's characteristics, so fewer problems develop. But if a parent and child's characteristics conflict, the child may be at risk for developing difficult behavior and the parent-child relationship may be strained. For example, a parent who is reasonably adaptable, mostly positive in mood, and less emotionally intense would tend to fit well with a child having similar characteristics. In fact, this parent would also be a good match for the intense, negative, slow-to-adapt child, because these characteristics may help moderate the child's. On the other hand, if both parent and child are slow to adapt, negative, and emotionally intense, more clashes are likely.

Other Biological Characteristics

Other biologically related characteristics besides temperament affect the way we act. These include physical, emotional, developmental, and health and medical issues.

1. Physical issues. A child's appearance, coordination, strength, energy level, and apparent intelligence often affect how people initially respond to him or her. Even children are judged by their appearance. Children who look weak and uncoordinated

may be neglected or rejected by people outside the family. And when children don't feel accepted by others, their self-esteem suffers. Some become people pleasers, doing almost anything to get people to like them. Others lose their desire to please others, feeling that their efforts are fruitless.

2. Emotional issues. Inborn emotional sensitivity affects a child's response to situations. A child whose feelings are easily hurt may react to a friend's teasing in angry, tearful ways, resulting in more teasing and even more open rejection by the other child. The more intense the reaction, the greater the child's anger and tears.

The emotional sensitivity of the parent also can be a factor. For example, parents who are depressed tend to be irritable with or withdrawn from their children. They may react inconsistently to their children and have trouble enforcing rules, giving positive feedback, and keeping track of the kids. A mother may be firm in requiring her child to do homework and praise the child for doing the work one evening. The next night, however, she may not notice any effort the child has made with the homework. The more depressed she becomes, the more difficult her interaction with her child becomes. The more trouble in the relationship, the more depressed the parent becomes.

3. Developmental issues. Developmental phases of a child's life have an important impact on hard-to-handle behavior. We typically think of the toddler years and adolescence as times when children test their independence and want more control over their own lives. Unfortunately, toddlers and teens rarely express their assertive, autonomous behaviors with a great deal of grace. (For resources on child development, see pages 42–43.)

Parents, too, have developmental phases that can affect their child. For example, a normal developmental task for adults in their thirties is to develop a career. Unfortunately, the time and energy a career requires may hinder a parent's ability to deal with children and family issues. This can exacerbate problems for hard-to-handle children and their parents, because these children need extra time and energy from adults.

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A Quick Look at Child Development Stages

Birth to 18 Months—The foundation of healthy psychological and social development in infants lies in establishing *basic trust*, the feeling that important people can be depended on most of the time to meet the child's emotional needs. Hard-to-handle infants cry often and for a long time. Those who don't respond to a parent's attempts to comfort may feel rejected when parents eventually withdraw their efforts. Though it's difficult, parents must continue to nurture and comfort, finding different ways to do so such as rocking or touching instead of cuddling.

18 Months to 3 Years—The toddler's task is to develop healthy *autonomy*, to balance independence with continued reliance on caregivers. Hard-to-handle behavior at this age involves being excessively strong-willed and defiant, and requires parents to help provide the proper balance. If parents give in to the child's demands too often, the child may get too much independence. But if parents try to squelch the behavior in an overly strong fashion, the child may rely too heavily on parents.

3 to 5 Years—The preschooler's job is to develop a healthy degree of *initiative*, to show a spirit of curiosity and try a wide variety of physical activities. Hard-to-handle children's actions, however, may be more intense than those of other kids—and potentially dangerous. This can lead to injury or cause parents to be overly restrictive of the child's curiosity and activity.

6 to 12 Years—For the period of *accomplishment* or *industry*, the school-age child's task is to develop a sense of achievement as a result of his or her own efforts. School success is important in developing this feeling of achievement. Hard-to-handle children who tend to resist directions from others, including teachers, may refuse to do what's needed for academic success. Lacking the sense of accomplishment, children of this age may develop a sense of inferiority.

13 to 18 Years—In adolescence, the job of the young person is to attain a sense of *identity*. He or she tries to answer questions such as "Who am I?" and "What do I want to accomplish in life?" For hard-to-handle teenagers who don't successfully pass through the earlier developmental stages of *basic trust*, *autonomy*, *initiative*, and *accomplishment*, this can be a difficult task. Struggling with a negative sense of identity, hard-to-handle teens may act out even more, often turning to aggression or using alcohol or other drugs.

4. **Health and medical issues.** People are learning more and more about how the mind and body are connected. Physical health can have important consequences for social and emotional

health. Children who have chronic health issues can be especially at risk for becoming hard-to-handle, not only because of natural temperament, but also because of the way family members may react. For example, parents of asthmatic children may try to protect their children by doing things for them that they could often do for themselves. As a result, some children with chronic illness may become demanding. Others may expect they will always be taken care of by someone concerned about their health.

For children diagnosed with ADHD (see page 9), their difficulties often affect both school and relationships. Since these are major parts of a child's life, the resulting feelings of failure can be particularly damaging, leading to lower self-esteem, higher frustration, and escalating confrontations with others.

Not only do children have health issues, but so do their parents. If a child has ADHD, it's not unusual to find out that one of the parents does, too. Those are families with impulsive, difficult-to-regulate adults trying to cope with impulsive, difficult-to-regulate children. Parents with ADHD often have a hard time organizing themselves, setting routines, and establishing the kind of structure and monitoring that difficult-to-manage children especially need.

Parenting Patterns

Individual characteristics affect the way adults parent their children, especially when it comes to discipline. Parents strive to teach children what they need to know and do in order to be happy, self-confident, responsible members of society.

But parents aren't the only ones doing the teaching. Children also teach their parents how to act with them and so affect how their mothers and fathers discipline. Most people (children and adults alike) tend to act in ways that will increase their benefits and decrease negative consequences. A behavior that "works" in some way tends to be repeated. But if a behavior results mainly in unpleasant consequences (meaning it doesn't work), it tends to occur less often.

What works and what doesn't differs from person to person. What may be a positive result for Kayla may not be seen that way by Kyle. For example, the attention that some children receive when they misbehave would seem to be negative. Who could possibly want to be fussed at? Yet a child who feels neglected may be content to receive any type of attention, even if it is unpleasant.

Parents teach their children in four general ways.

1. Example. A primary way to teach children is through example. Young people are often more prone to learn what we *do* than what we *say*. If we tell our children to speak nicely to others, but we talk harshly to them, we contradict ourselves. Actions speak louder than words.

2. Positive feedback. A second way to teach children is through positive feedback about the way they act. If we tell our children how much we appreciate their following directions, they'll more likely repeat that behavior.

We need to be careful with feedback, however. Sometimes, the feedback itself is not positive but leads to a positive effect for the child. Take a mother who asks her daughter to unload the dishwasher, for example. The child delays. The mother repeats her request. The child continues to resist and throws a temper tantrum. If the mother is tired, she may stop giving directions and do the job herself to keep peace. This feedback teaches the child that continual resistance to directions works.

On another level, this situation also works for the parent. Yes, she ends up doing the daughter's job and feels angry about it, but at least the screaming stopped. In other words, it feels *less* negative for the mother to do the task herself than to deal with her daughter's unpleasant behavior.

Unfortunately, while the child avoids temporary unpleasantness, she doesn't learn responsibility. And the parent also continues to experience a demanding, angry child who doesn't follow directions. So while the process works in the short run, it doesn't produce good results in the long run.

3. No feedback. Parents also teach children by ignoring the way their children act. Behaviors that don't receive feedback tend to decrease over time. In other words, ignoring behavior may well lead to its decline—especially if the behaviors are merely annoying. Consider the whiner. If a parent can ignore the whining and say, "When you ask me in a 5-year-old voice, I'll answer you," and then tune out until the child uses a 5-year-old voice, whining tends to decrease. Withholding feedback shouldn't be used with highly disruptive behaviors, however, such as yelling or hitting.

4. Punishment. Finally, parents teach children through punishment, or *actively* giving negative feedback following a behavior. While punishment can be an effective means of teaching, it's not as helpful as more positive methods, especially if used too much. In fact, when punishment is used too strongly and too often, it may *increase* negative behavior because of the child's emotional reactions to the punishment itself. This is even more likely to happen with the intense, strong-willed child. Parents who often yell and spank their children may find that their children don't become remorseful but actually strike back. While some parents then back down, others come on even more forcefully, and a vicious circle begins.

When used consistently, relatively mild punishments, such as removing privileges or using time out, can be effective in dealing with hard-to-handle behaviors. But even mild punishments alone shouldn't outweigh the use of more positive teaching approaches.

Family Stress

All families experience stress from the daily hassles of living, and family stress can clearly influence how children behave. Even small difficulties, if frequent and persistent, may create significant problems for adults and children.[4] Over time, the daily grind of waking at 6:00 A.M., leaving the house by 7:30 A.M., and getting home to eat dinner at 6:00 P.M., then squeezing in homework,

baths, and bedtime routines, takes its toll and affects how family members act with each other.

Stress affects kids because it affects how adults parent. Parents under stress from job difficulties, financial strains, depression, conflicting demands, or marital problems have less energy to parent. When this happens, parents may overreact to a child's behavior by becoming forceful—or by not dealing with misbehavior at all. As a result, the child becomes less cooperative and communication between parent and child becomes more strained and conflicted.

Marital stress. Professionals disagree on how strongly strife between parents affects children when the conflict is relatively mild. But it's clear that when parents are openly hostile toward each other, the impact on children is negative.

What's particularly troublesome is when parents disagree about how to parent the child: usually one parent reacts more sternly and harshly toward the child while the other fails to set limits. Parents may further disagree on which behaviors need discipline. Dad may think a child's table manners need attention, while Mom insists they're fine. Major differences between parents' expectations only confuse the child, who may behave inconsistently, not knowing how to act.

Eventually children learn that there are certain ways to behave with Mom and different ways to act with Dad. If Dad is the strict one, children probably go to Mom whenever they want something. They learn to manipulate situations and people in order to get what they want or need. Of course, we all do this somewhat, but children caught between two parents who have different expectations become particularly good at it.

Single-parent stress. Look at the stress experienced by two parents raising a difficult child, double it, and you have a fair estimate of the single parent's plight. Single parents have less time and often fewer financial resources. Single parents may have difficulties receiving regular child support from a noncustodial parent. And just because a child's parents are no longer together doesn't

mean that conflicts cease. Estranged parents frequently argue about discipline and visitation, support payments and values, all to the detriment of the child.

Some single parents, such as widowed or adoptive parents, have special stresses. Widowed parents are dealing with grief and major lifestyle changes that may limit their ability to handle a child's behavior. Adoptive single parents may feel extra pressure to be the perfect parent, trying to compensate for the absent biological parents.

Stepfamily stress. One of the largest stresses for stepfamilies is the stepparent's role in discipline. Children often feel they don't have to listen to a stepparent. Lines quickly become drawn about who belongs to whom within the family.

When George Morgan married Debbie, he brought his 6-year-old son, Michael, from a previous marriage, and she brought her 9-year-old daughter, Melissa. A few months after the wedding, Melissa began mouthing back to her mother. Debbie didn't let Melissa get by with this behavior and argued with Melissa about the way she was acting. Melissa didn't let up, and neither did her mom.

Eventually all this arguing got on George's nerves. One day he blew up at Melissa for yelling at her mother, and Melissa ran crying from the room screaming, "You're not my dad! I don't have to listen to you!" Debbie became upset with George for being harsh with Melissa and accused him of wanting Melissa to be perfect like his "precious Michael."

Stepfamilies also can experience stress in dealing with former spouses. While many biological mothers and fathers can be civil on behalf of their children, a number carry their predivorce conflict well past the divorce. This also happened with the Morgans.

As part of the divorce agreement, Debbie's former husband, Rick, sees Melissa every other weekend. But Rick doesn't pay child support regularly. He tells Melissa, "Your mother is trying to send me to the poorhouse." Upset, Melissa tells her mother not to be so hard on her dad. Debbie backs off because she doesn't want the situation to create more distress for Melissa.

But Melissa's stepfather, George, is angry. He wants Debbie to take Rick back to court to make him pay what he owes. Debbie feels even more torn; she and George argue openly about this, which upsets Melissa further.

Repeated stressful episodes take their toll on children and the quality of family life. When you add in a child's difficult behaviors, family members can feel stretched beyond the breaking point.

Influences Outside the Family

Factors outside the immediate family also influence how children act. Extended family has a role, just like peers, school and child care staff, and the media. Understanding how each can play a part may help us in parenting hard-to-handle children.

Extended family. Other family members can strongly influence the hard-to-handle child. Sometimes they increase conflict; for example, when parents and grandparents have different opinions on how to deal with the difficult child's behavior.

David's grandparents feel that his parents are too hard on him, and they let David do anything he wants whenever he visits. Returning home, David then threatens to tell his grandparents if his parents punish him. Feeling resentful, David's parents nonetheless go easier on him for a few days to avoid conflict with the grandparents, which gives David mixed feedback about his behavior.

Sarah's grandparents, on the other hand, react differently. Sarah spends afternoons at her grandparents until her mom gets home from work. Grandma and Grandpa discussed the arrangements with Sarah's mom and agreed that Sarah would follow the same rules at their house as she did at home. Sarah discovered early on that her mom and her grandparents meant what they said and would frequently back each other up.

Peers. As children grow older, peers become an important influence. Peers, too, can have positive or negative effects. When

hard-to-handle Larry, for example, spends extended time with his easygoing friend Ramon, he's more relaxed at home the next day and more compliant. However, when he plays even a few hours with rough-and-tumble Angelo, he comes home wired, tired, and more irritable than usual.

Interfering with a child's peer relationships usually doesn't help. If the difficult child's behavior is clearly affected negatively by a friend, however, parents should manage when, where, and how long the children spend time together. They may need to arrange shorter times for the children to play and plan less intense activities with more adult supervision.

School. Schoolwork, teachers, and classmates all have the potential of exacerbating or decreasing the hard-to-handle behaviors of a child. Eleven-year-old Rashad struggled with math. He had a tutor, but he just couldn't understand multiplication and division of fractions. In class, he alternated between sulking and bothering other kids while they worked.

His teacher felt Rashad just wasn't trying hard enough and publicly accused him of this one day. Angry with the teacher, Rashad knocked over a chair, which accidentally hit another student. Several other students became angry at Rashad and yelled at him. Some avoided him, while a few teased him about what happened.

The teacher sent Rashad to the principal, who suspended him from school. Later at home, Rashad's frustration spilled out. He hit his little sister in the head with a toy truck, screamed at his parents, and finished the day by breaking a lamp in his room while throwing objects around in anger. It was one of the most difficult evenings the family had ever experienced.

Child care. Child care can present another source of problems for hard-to-handle children. Caregiver turnover, rotating shifts by a number of different caregivers, and caregivers who have different approaches to misbehavior can be especially hard for challenging children.

Seven-year-old Jana was cared for at a large child care center by Mr. Charlie before school and by Miss Allison after school. Jana

really liked Mr. Charlie, who greeted her each morning by name and spoke with a kind firmness in his voice, even when disciplining. Whenever she was with Mr. Charlie, Jana generally acted appropriately for her age.

After school, however, was a different story. Miss Allison seemed tired and spoke in a blunt, often irritable tone. Jana didn't respond well to her and often acted up. Jana's parents heard only how much she misbehaved at child care, since they had no direct contact with Mr. Charlie and heard only negative reports from Miss Allison.

When Mr. Charlie was offered a better job and left with only two days' notice, Jana became upset. She acted even worse at child care, and her misbehavior spilled over at school and at home. When negative reports started coming in from so many settings, the vicious circle of conflict spun faster.

Media violence. We live in a media-saturated culture, and many children spend hours each day watching television, listening to the radio, playing video games, and surfing the Internet. The violence they witness through the media can have a particularly troubling affect on hard-to-handle children.

Children have always been exposed to violence, and the capacity for aggression is probably present in all of us. Children also have always found an entertaining side to aggressive activities. Just look at how children stage pretend battles and at the aggression present in fairy tales and folklore. But since the 1960s, the graphic depiction of violence in movies, television, and video games, has increased dramatically. It's one thing to *read* about the wolf eating Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, but it's quite another to see someone's head blown off by a semiautomatic weapon.

Research clearly indicates that frequent exposure to graphic violence negatively affects how some children interact with others. This is especially true for hard-to-handle children who are intense and often negative anyway. (For more on media violence, see pages 86–87 and 162–163.)

How Influences Work Together

A lot of hard-to-handle behavior would make sense if we could isolate one cause and then fix it. Yet life is rarely that simple.

Consider the Hills. Nine-year-old Jason is a high-spirited child who expresses his feelings strongly. He can be irritable and demanding, enthusiastic and active, one of those boys who's quick to anger, whether he's striking out in baseball or defending his best friend. His mother, Linda, can also be irritable, but she generally expresses it by withdrawing. Jason yells when he's upset, while Linda rolls her eyes and shrugs, exasperated. She's prone to depression, which began when she was a teenager.

Chuck, Jason's father, has always had a high energy level. He's extroverted and likes a lot of stimulation. When Chuck's in a good mood, he bounces around happily and laughs loudly. When he's angry, however, he stomps his feet, slams doors, and yells. Chuck's ulcer acts up when he's under a lot of stress.

Linda and Chuck have good jobs, but both work long hours. Jason stays with Linda's parents after school, where he spends his time playing combat-oriented video games and watching TV.

At the end of one weekday, here's what happens:

CHUCK: What a day. I'm beat.

LINDA: My day was terrible. I did all that work on the Benson contract last night, but now the boss wants me to add a bunch of stuff to it tonight. [*She sighs.*] How about if I start supper and you help Jason with his homework?

CHUCK: Gee, thanks a lot. [*He approaches Jason, who is watching cartoons.*] Okay, Jason. Let's get started on your homework.

JASON: I don't have any.

CHUCK: That's what you always say. But your teacher called last week and said you weren't turning any homework in. So, hop to it!

JASON: [*He glares at his father.*] I said, I don't have any!

CHUCK: Don't you yell at me, young man. I've had too rough a day to put up with your mouth. Move it!

LINDA: Stop it, you two! I've got so much on my mind. I just can't take this!

CHUCK: [*He glares at Jason.*] Now, see what you've done! You're always upsetting things around here!

JASON: It's your fault! I said I didn't have any homework!

By this time, Chuck's ulcer is starting to bother him. The phone rings. It's his father-in-law, complaining about Jason leaving their den a mess that day. Meanwhile, Jason has gone to his room to play video games. After Chuck hangs up, he complains to Linda about her father's phone call. Linda leaves the room in tears, yelling that Chuck blames her parents for everything.

Chuck's stomach really hurts now, and he can imagine how much worse it will get if he confronts Jason again about homework. So Chuck sets the table and finishes preparing dinner. The family eats in silence, while Chuck and Linda feel treated unfairly by each other and inwardly angry at Jason.

The winner in this family drama is Jason. He gets to play video games the rest of the night without anyone hassling him, and he goes to bed later than usual since neither parent is up to enforcing his usual bedtime.

Of course, Jason is only the winner in the short run, but that's good enough for a 9-year-old. For Chuck and Linda, both their personality characteristics and stress strongly affect their parenting. In failing to deal effectively with Jason's behavior, they've essentially taught Jason that being resistant and negative works.

As you know from your own experience, the behavior of hard-to-handle kids can be extremely frustrating. And given all of the complex factors that influence our child's behavior and our reactions to it, it's no wonder many parents struggle. To parent these children, we need to prepare ourselves with special skills.

Notes:

1. The works of Alexander Thomas, Stella Chess, Herbert Birch, Isabelle Briggs-Myers, and Katherine Briggs have strongly influenced the section on temperament characteristics. For more information, see:

   Chess, S. & A. Thomas. (1986). *Temperament in Clinical Practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

   Thomas, A., S. Chess & H.G. Birch. (1968). *Temperament and Behavior Disorders in Children*. New York: New York University Press.

   Myers, I.B. & M.H. McCaulley. (1985). *A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

   Myers, I.B. (1980). *Gifts Differing*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

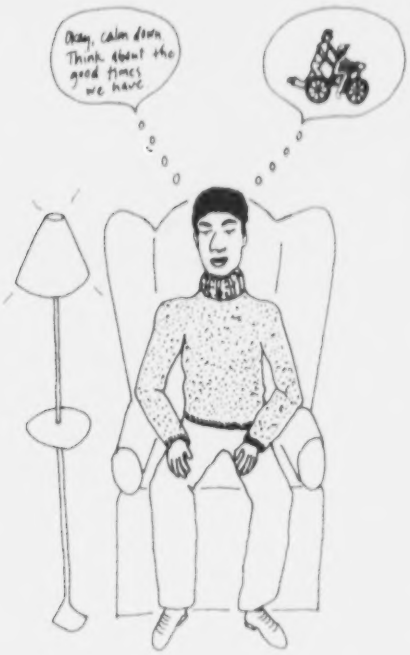
2. The patterns of extroverted or introverted, sensing or intuition, thinking or feeling, and judging or perceiving are more readily observed as children grow older. All of these patterns probably represent traits that are a mixture of inborn tendencies (temperament) and experience.

3. Erikson, E.H. (1963). *Childhood and Society*, second edition, revised. New York: Norton.

4. Rathus, S.A. (1996). *Psychology in the New Millennium*. Forth Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.

CHAPTER 3

Caring for Yourself as a Parent



As adults, we can look at our own characteristics and actions, see how they affect our relationships, and then do something about them. Children, especially young ones, simply don't have this capacity for self-reflection, which develops gradually during childhood and adolescence. This means that whenever there are problems between an adult and a child, it's the adult's responsibility to

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recognize the difficulty and begin the process of change. Before we can help another person through change, however, we need to examine our own lives to see if we need to modify *our* attitudes and actions. As the early Greeks said, "Know thyself."

The great psychologist Carl Jung pointed out important areas of self-knowledge that can affect our parenting. Jung said that one of the first steps toward self-knowledge is to develop an awareness and understanding of our own hard-to-handle behaviors. As much as we hate to admit it, we all have both positive and negative characteristics. They can be so different, so contradictory, that it's like we're made up of several different people. We may try to keep our inner "funny cousins" and "horse thieves" from public view, but they sometimes pop out in our behavior, often unexpectedly.

Our negative traits sometimes reveal themselves when we overreact to something our child has done. When Gloria asked her daughter Sara to make her bed, Sara matter-of-factly replied, "I'm busy; I'll do it later." Gloria blew up at Sara's defiance and grounded her for three days. As Gloria calmed down, she thought about her reaction, puzzled at its strength. She apologized, telling Sara, "I wasn't myself when I acted like that." But, in many ways, Gloria *was* herself when she blew up at her daughter. All of us have an angry, unreasonable side. It's simply a part of us that we don't like and may have a hard time accepting.

The unacceptable parts of ourselves clamor for recognition just as the acceptable ones do. When we fail to attend to them, a couple of things can happen. First, we push them into our emotional cellar, where they accumulate and ferment like garbage. Every now and then, the accumulation pushes the cellar door open briefly and we erupt over some triviality. At other times, the garbage just collects and drags us down into periods of depression, anxiety, or physical symptoms we don't understand.

Something else may occur when we fail to recognize and deal with our negative side: We may project our own unacceptable features onto other people. In other words, we see negative characteristics in other people because we don't want to acknowledge that we have the same faults. When we find ourselves reacting disproportionately to a particular behavior in our child, we may

need to watch for similar behaviors in ourselves—behaviors we don't like to admit we have.

Besides understanding ourselves better, we can also try other strategies that will prepare us to deal with our children's hard-to-handle behavior. The more we can incorporate these strategies into our parenting, the more effective our efforts will be.

Learn About Child Development

Many difficulties between parents and children evaporate when parents learn more about child development. Some behaviors parents find upsetting are typical for a certain age. They're actually normal. For example, temper tantrums are common for children ages 2 to 4. These are hard-to-handle behaviors that we must manage, but they shouldn't lead to excessive concern or overreaction at this age. (For more on developmental stages, see the chart on page 26.)

Understanding child development not only lets us know what to expect at different times in our child's life, but it also helps us know how children think and what they understand about themselves. For example, preschoolers don't view the world the way older children and adults do. They see situations from their own point of view and have a hard time understanding how others feel. Young children aren't adept at analyzing their own behavior and understanding the reasons for it. If you ask a 4-year-old, "Why did you do that?" the only honest answer the child can give is, "Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time." And it's true. From a preschooler's point of view, it *did*.

Young children are more likely to be influenced by what's going on at the moment than by an internal set of rules or values. They get caught up in an activity and fail to reflect on whether they should or shouldn't be doing it. As children develop, they learn to internalize appropriate parental rules and social norms.

Check It Out

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
http://www.aap.org
AAP is an organization dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. This Web site includes pediatrician referral services, recommended resources for parents and caregivers, audio files, surveys, and updates on legislative issues relating to the physical and mental health of children.

AAP offers a three-volume series on child development:

> ***Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5,*** edited by Steven P. Shelov and Robert E. Hannemann (New York: Bantam Books, 1993). Gives information on basic care for young children.
>
> ***Caring for Your School-Aged Child: Ages 5 to 12,*** edited by Edward L. Schor (New York: Bantam Books, 1996). Includes solid, practical information on how to promote health and normal development in elementary-school children.
>
> ***Caring for Your Adolescent: Ages 12 to 21,*** edited by Donald E. Greydanus (New York: Bantam Books, 1991). Addresses issues such as parent-teen communication, peer pressure, and other issues that typically arise during adolescence.

Child and Adolescent Development by Kelvin Seifert (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Explains what parents can expect at each stage of a child's development.

Child Behavior by Frances L. Ilg, Louise Bates Ames, and Sidney Baker, revised edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1991). Offers advice on child psychology and child rearing from the Gesell Institute of Human Development.

ParentsPlace.com
http://www.parentsplace.com
Weekly newsletters highlighting topics such as children's health, marriage, family, book reviews, activities, and recipes appear along with a daily survey and its results. Bulletin boards and chat rooms let parents connect with each other to discuss problems that only other parents would know how to help solve.

The National Parenting Center
http://www.tnpc.com
Daily articles help provide parents with responsible guidance from one of the site's nine world-reknowned childrearing authorities. Articles focus on medical, behavior, and educational issues. A page of links to other related sites is also available.

Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4–14. A Resource for Parents and Teachers by Chip Wood (Greenfield, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 1997). Offers clear and concise lists describing the universal characteristics of children at different ages.

Develop Self-Control Through Relaxation

Self-control is difficult for most of us, at least in some areas of our lives. Learning to control our behavior helps us influence our children's actions. If parents and children are out of control at the same time, watch out!

Relaxation is the fundamental component of self-control, since a person can't be relaxed and out of control at the same time. For example, taking three long, slow deep breaths goes a long way toward controlling our anger. This is especially true if we start these deep breaths when our emotions are just beginning to build rather than waiting until they're too strong. It's a lot easier to snuff out a match than a torch.

We can also systematically and regularly practice relaxation. Such practice lowers the resting level of tension and makes us less likely to lose control in times of stress. A particularly effective way to do this is to set aside at least 10 minutes twice a day to engage in deep muscle relaxation. Sit in a comfortable position, close your eyes, and tense and relax the different muscle groups in your body. You might, for example, tense the muscles in your forehead for three seconds, then gradually relax them. Proceed down your body in the same manner with the muscles in your jaw, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, trunk, abdomen, hips, legs, and feet. By first tensing then relaxing, you experience the relaxation more strongly because of the contrast.

Check It Out

The Relaxation Response by Herbert Benson (New York: William Morrow, 1975). A classic book that includes techniques on how to reduce stress.

Use Positive Self-Talk

The way we talk to ourselves inside our heads, our "self-talk," also can make a difference in how we care for ourselves and control our emotions. Too often our thoughts intensify our anger: "That kid is driving me crazy. He's just like his father!" By talking this way to ourselves, we work ourselves into such a snit that we continue to talk angrily to ourselves long after the situation has passed. Anger can take on a life of its own, and we may even experience a grim satisfaction and self-righteousness in continuing to feel it.

> *Anyone can be angry. That's easy. But to*
> *be angry at the right person to the right degree*
> *at the right time for the right purpose and*
> *in the right way, that is not easy.*
>
> —Aristotle

It's impossible to take thoughtful, effective action if our emotions are out of control—we yell at the problem instead of dealing with it productively. It's far better to settle our anger and not let it consume us. Not only does keeping our anger in check help us, but it also helps our children and our relationship with them.

Imagine how you'd feel if you said to yourself, "Okay now, calm down, get a grip on yourself, breathe deeply, feel relaxed and in control." By using relaxation and self-talk to control our own behavior, we become better problem solvers, and we set a positive example for our children.

Expecting a level of self-control from our kids that we don't expect of ourselves doesn't work. *It's not fair to expect our children to behave more maturely than we do.* If we frequently lash out at our children, they may end up becoming "smoldering images of ourselves," as writer Thomas Ehrich said.

Check It Out

Positive Self-Talk for Children: Teaching Self-Esteem Through Affirmations. A Guide for Parents, Teachers and Counselors by Douglas Bloch (New York: Bantam, 1993). This step-by-step guide shows you how to speak more affirmatively to yourself and your children, and how to teach children to speak more affirmatively to themselves.

Learn When to Walk Away

Sometimes deep breathing and calming self-talk won't help. When conflict occurs over and over, you probably won't be able to keep your emotions under control. It's even harder when your child is upset, too. Deep breathing does little when you've been trying every trick in the book to get your 4-year-old into the bathtub and she continues to say, "I'm not going to take a bath, and you can't make me!" It's even worse when you've faced this situation 10 evenings in a row.

Another time calm self-talk is ineffective is when your child is in danger. When a 6-year-old runs into the street, your concern will run right after him or her. Once the child is safe, however, you may be more angry than ever!

In these situations, you may have to remove yourself. That means physically leaving. In other words, we need to do what we often tell our kids to do when they're upset with their peers: Just walk away. It sounds simple, but it's very hard to do.

When you walk away from your child, focus on breathing deeply and then talk to yourself positively. "It's okay to be upset. It's good that you realized that you needed some space right now."

Once you regain control, you can return to deal with the problem more effectively.

Plan Ahead Through Mental Imagery

In situations that occur repeatedly, we can anticipate difficulties and develop self-control strategies in advance. Hard-to-handle children are often predictable, yet we feel surprised every time they act up.

Children who have habitually resisted taking a bath in the past will probably do so in the future. Instead of waiting for the inevitable, think about how you'll control yourself and deal productively with the situation. For example, before you tell the child it's bath time, take a few moments to close your eyes and relax through deep breathing. Imagine yourself giving a direction and your child resisting. Then change the image to show how you want to act and how you'd like your child to act. Picture yourself responding calmly to the child's refusal and using a positive parenting strategy (you'll learn about several in chapter 7). Finally, imagine the child responding appropriately to your instruction while you remain calm but firm.

It's been said that if you can imagine something, you can accomplish it. While it's easy to dismiss this advice—you can probably imagine yourself sprouting wings and flying—there is truth to it. Setting goals and mentally practicing solutions to problems increases the likelihood that you can act effectively when difficulties arise.

You can even take imagery and self-talk a step further. Use them to improve your attitude toward your hard-to-handle child. When you're going through a rough period with your child, take time each day to relax and engage in positive imagery and self-talk about your child. Imagine pleasant encounters with your child from the recent or distant past and talk to yourself about your son or daughter's positive characteristics.

Children need the most love
when they are the least lovable.

—Anonymous

No matter how difficult your child's behavior is at the moment, you've had times when your child has acted positively and appropriately—during family vacations, while playing together on the weekend, or while snuggling at bedtime. Focus on your child's dazzling smile or the image of your child sleeping quietly at night or playing cooperatively with a friend.

Figure Out What's Important

One of the most important things in parenting the hard-to-handle child is to set priorities. We can't—and don't need to—work on everything at once. Not everything is equally important. On a scale of 1 to 10, Caitlin wearing a mismatched outfit to school is a 1 at most. Children, like adults, have strong opinions about clothes, food, and friends. To struggle over these areas is to pick a fight.

Opinions that don't relate to health or safety aren't worth fighting over. In some families, matters of little importance become the subject of intense battles. The fights are so bitter because the stakes are so low. Before you fight, think of the stakes. Choose your battles wisely.

Some behaviors improve with maturity and experience. For example, young children often engage in repetitive behaviors that are annoying and seem senseless to us. The 3-year-old may repeatedly turn light switches on and off, and the 5-year-old may demand that the same story be read in exactly the same way every night. These actions pass as children mature, so we shouldn't get too excited over them. (Of course, we can matter-of-factly remove the child from the light switch after several clicks and encourage him or her to do something else.)

Remember, you aren't the only one who influences your child. A child may work hard in school because of the influence of a

teacher or a friend, even after initially resisting the advice of a parent. We can often count on others to reinforce messages we give. We aren't the only ones giving our children the message that education is important—so do teachers, neighbors, extended family, and friends.

Finally, don't fret about potential problems too far in advance. Parents sometimes worry about a second grader's inconsistent study habits, concerned that if students don't do homework daily, they'll never make it in high school. Good study habits at 7 look very different from good study habits at 12, and much can change over time. Sometimes it's helpful to lighten up.

Focus on How *You* Can Change

Like every parent, I want nothing so much as my children's well-being. I want it so badly that I may actually succeed in turning myself into a contented and well-adjusted person, if only for my children's sake.

—Joyce Maynard

No matter how good your intentions and how often you might relax, visualize, self-talk, walk away, and prioritize, some habits of interaction with your children will be hard to break. Putting yourself on a reward-and-punishment system may help out.

Start by picking a parenting behavior you'd like to change. Perhaps you want to stop yelling so much. Get two jars and put them on the refrigerator. Mark one with a plus sign and another with a minus sign. Every time you deal with a conflict firmly but without yelling, put a dollar in the jar with the plus sign. Every time you yell, pay a fine by placing a dollar in the other jar.

After you have $10 in the plus jar, reward yourself: Treat yourself and a friend to an ice cream sundae, go to a movie, or visit a favorite park. Make these rewards ones you get to enjoy only when

you earn them. This method is a strategy you can use to promote more positive child behavior (see chapter 8). If you start by trying this system on yourself, you'll be able to empathize with your child if you use it with him or her.

What do you do when your fine jar is full? First of all, the money you've collected must not benefit you or your family in any way. You might consider giving it to a favorite charity, or an organization like Parents Anonymous that works to strengthen families. But you might not feel the punishment if the money goes to a cause you believe in—it's too easy to tell yourself that it's for a good cause. I suggest you give the money to a cause you *don't* support. If you're a Republican, send a contribution to the Democratic National Committee. If you're in favor of gun control, contribute to the National Rifle Association. (If you do this, contribute anonymously to avoid getting on unwanted mailing lists!) If this sounds terrible, the technique may work well, although if it causes too much ethical distress, try something else.

Your commitment to rewarding and punishing yourself may become stronger if you tell your family about it. Explain to your children what you're doing. Write out your commitment and post it on the refrigerator. Public commitments often work better than private ones.

Forgive Yourself and Your Child

The ancient Greek writer Epictetus said, "Forgiveness is better than punishment." He probably also meant self-punishment. Sure, we can punish ourselves by putting money in our fine jar, but to blame ourselves for all our child's problems is fruitless and wrong-headed.

Parents want to do well by their children, yet we make mistakes despite our good intentions. If we become immobilized by guilt and self-recrimination, we can't help our children. Guilt can make us feel sorry for not being perfect, and we may try to make it up to our children by giving in. But rather than giving in or giving up, we can forgive ourselves and commit to new, more effective actions.

When it's appropriate, we also can ask our children to forgive us when we overreact. Sincerely telling our children we're sorry sets a good example and moves the relationship back to a more positive footing.

We may also need to forgive our hard-to-handle child for the problems that arise. It's easy to stay angry at these kids and grow resentful of the demands their actions place on us. Forgiving a child may be easier when we realize that most children under seven don't consciously try to manipulate us. All of us, especially children, act in ways we don't fully understand. Forgiveness leads to fewer negative feelings and less guilt.

Take Time for Yourself

Finally, in order to have the energy to parent hard-to-handle children, you must have energy coming in. Build up reserves by giving yourself time and space. Everybody finds that time and space in different ways. One person may be refreshed by daily walks in the woods. Another may listen to music each day. Someone else may read inspirational literature. Others gain energy by visiting friends.

It's vital also for parents to have regular positive times with each other. It's easy to put this relationship last, but it needs to be first. By spending time with each other, you'll find the energy to work together on behalf of your hard-to-handle child. This isn't easy to do. Many families have two parents in the workforce. And single parents have even more demands. Yet we do have some say about how we use our time. Once we decide that it's important to nurture ourselves and our adult relationships, we'll discover opportunities to do so.

A parent's self-nurturing opportunities may be brief and infrequent, but they are there. Fifteen minutes over lunch could be devoted to a walk outside or listening to music on headphones. You could take time during your commute to practice relaxation. Some people even do deep breathing when sitting at a traffic signal.

Without time to ourselves, we're like cars running on empty, trying to move even though we're out of gas. Our energy disappears

quickly. If we don't take care of ourselves and our family relationships, we may end up in the doctor's office—or with a therapist or marriage counselor. Eventually we need to devote time to these matters, so why not do so in a way we find enjoyable?

CHAPTER 4

Becoming an Authoritative Parent

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The goal of parenting is to give young people the knowledge and skills they need to function in society. Parents work to instill values in their children to help them develop competence and inner peace. They encourage honesty, hard work, self-respect, compassion, and responsibility. With training and maturity, these characteristics become integral parts of a child's life.

How we parent affects how well our children develop these values and behaviors. Child development expert Diana Baumrind has classified three general styles of parenting: *authoritative*, *authoritarian*, and *permissive*.[1] These three parenting styles differ mainly in how parents balance nurturing and support of their children with structure and direction. The most balanced style—authoritative parenting—is the most effective.

Becoming an authoritative parent involves acquiring skills. Whenever we learn something new—whether it's playing tennis, driving a car, or preparing the perfect omelet—it usually feels difficult and awkward in the beginning. But with practice, we get better, and the skills feel more natural. You'll learn some skills for being an authoritative parent throughout this book.

Parenting all children can be challenging, but it takes extra time and energy and new strategies to parent a hard-to-handle child effectively. Learning new ways of parenting can be difficult, but you're already expending a great deal of effort with your hard-to-handle kid. In the long run, effective parenting consumes less energy than either permissive or authoritarian approaches.

Before you read more about how to become an authoritative parent, find out what parenting style you're currently using.

What's Your Parenting Style?

In the checklist below, mark the answer that most closely fits your parenting style. Be honest. Check how you *usually* act, not how you'd *like* to act.

The Way You Act as a Parent	Usually Yes	Usually No
1. I set few rules and expectations for my child.	☐	☐
2. I am in charge and enforce the rules, no matter what.	☐	☐
3. I'm inconsistent in disciplining my child.	☐	☐
4. I consider my child's wishes and opinions along with my own when making decisions.	☐	☐
5. Discipline means punishment.	☐	☐
6. I deal with misbehavior directly and not harshly.	☐	☐

	Usually Yes	Usually No
7. I reward my child for acting appropriately.	☐	☐
8. I ignore most of my child's inappropriate behavior as normal.	☐	☐
9. I keep my annoyance and anger about my child's behavior to myself.	☐	☐
10. I value my child's school achievement and support my child's efforts.	☐	☐
11. I feel overwhelmed and am almost ready to give up on my child.	☐	☐
12. I often give in to my child's arguing, whining, and other demands.	☐	☐
13. I make most of my child's decisions, even those that would be developmentally appropriate for my child to make.	☐	☐
14. I often express anger toward my child.	☐	☐
15. I expect my child to act independently at an age-appropriate level.	☐	☐
16. I strongly value my child's free expression of wishes and impulses.	☐	☐
17. I use strong and frequently physical punishment.	☐	☐
18. I support my child's constructive, responsible behavior.	☐	☐
19. I communicate rules clearly and directly.	☐	☐
20. Many of my rules are general rather than specific. My child knows what I really mean.	☐	☐
21. I spend little time with my child.	☐	☐

Scoring

Each of the numbers below corresponds to the number at the beginning of each statement within the checklist. Circle the numbers of the questions you answered yes to.

Authoritarian: 2, 5, 13, 14, 17, 20, 21

Authoritative: 4, 6, 7, 10, 15, 18, 19

Permissive: 1, 3, 8, 9, 11, 12, 16

Your general parenting style is the one in which you had the greatest number of yes responses. If the total yes responses are about the same in two or three areas, you have a mixed parenting style, which is probably the most common approach to parenting.

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Authoritative Parenting

Authoritative parents balance emotional nurturance and support with structure and direction in raising their children. To be nurturing and supportive, these parents express a lot of affection and warmth to their children. They listen actively and with interest, and regularly spend positive one-on-one time with their children. Authoritative parents let children make some of their own decisions and encourage children to develop their own personal styles and interests rather than trying to place them in a niche.

Authoritative parents realize that some hard-to-handle qualities go hand-in-hand with positive qualities. A stubborn child who challenges can also be a persistent, focused child who gets things done. In short, authoritative parenting involves a deep respect for children as unique individuals who are worthy of acceptance and love, even when they act in distressing ways.

Authoritative parents balance this support with structure and direction. They require children to accept responsibility, obey reasonable limits, and behave appropriately according to the situation and the child's age. Rather than relying on punishment to supply structure, these parents emphasize positive feedback. They encourage verbal give-and-take, and they usually provide reasons for their actions—keeping in mind the child's developmental level. Although parents take the child's needs and wishes into account as much as possible, they remain the parents and make the final decisions on matters of importance. As the child grows older, however, parents allow the child to make more decisions, continuing to guide the child into choices in her or his best interest.

In essence, authoritative parents *give* a lot (nurturing and responsiveness), and *require* a lot (responsibility). Parents who use this approach most of the time also set good examples for the balance between nurturance and assertiveness people need in healthy social relationships throughout their lives.

Research over the past 30 years indicates that children of authoritative parents tend to have healthy self-esteem, positive peer relationships, self-confidence, independence, and school success. They also seem to have fewer emotional difficulties than people

who are raised with other styles of parenting. These children cope well with stress, strive toward goals, and balance self-control with curiosity and interest in a variety of situations.

What an Authoritative Parent Is Like

- High on support and emotional nurturing.
- High on positive structure and direction.

Authoritarian Parenting

Where authoritative parenting strives to balance structure and nurture, authoritarian parenting emphasizes assertiveness and direction over responsiveness. The parent places a high value on children doing what they're told and not bucking the system. "I am the parent; you are the child" distinctions are clear, and often continue as children grow older.

Unlike the authoritative parent, authoritarian parents tend to impose rules without discussing them with their children. They are less likely to take the child's wishes and needs into account. Parental directions or decisions are justified with "Because I said so."

Authoritarian parents demand orderly, socially desirable behavior and emphasize respect for authority. They use punishment as a disciplinary tool and easily express anger and displeasure toward their children. Of course authoritarian parents aren't cold and unresponsive all the time, but they are more often demanding and assertive and less often positive and loving with their children.

Research has shown that children of authoritarian parents may become inhibited, fearful, withdrawn, and at increased risk for depression. They also may have a difficult time making decisions for themselves, since they're used to being told what to do. Authoritarian parents don't tolerate much disagreement, so their children tend to struggle with independence. While these children

may be inwardly angry at their parents, many don't express it openly. They may appear moody, irritable, and sulky, but they usually seem well-behaved and come across as "good" children, especially around their parents.

Some hard-to-handle children, however, vigorously resist an authoritarian parenting style. The parent pushes the child, and the child pushes back. The parent demands, and the child resists. When the child resists, the parent demands more. As the parent demands more, the child resists further. The cycle of confrontation may lead to harsh punishments and strong responses that are psychologically (or even physically) damaging to the parent, the child, and the relationship between them.

Strong punishments, especially before age 6, tend to increase hard-to-handle behaviors, not decrease them. This is true for physical punishment and for harsh verbal punishments such as insults and name-calling.

What an Authoritarian Parent Is Like

- Low on support and emotional nurturing.
- High on structure and direction.

Permissive Parenting

Diana Baumrind also identifies a third parenting style, which she calls permissive parenting. Permissive parents don't set up appropriate structure and boundaries for their children. Baumrind describes two kinds of permissive parents: the *permissive-indulgent* parent and the *disengaged* parent.

Permissive-indulgent parents may be warm, cuddly, and responsive, but they provide little direction and structure. Because these parents tend to believe that the free expression of impulses and desires is important to psychological development, they place few demands on the child for mature, independent behavior. They

set forth few rules and expectations. The child in effect runs the household, and parents generally hide any impatience, anger, or annoyance. When these parents do set rules, the guidelines tend to be vague and inconsistently enforced.

Many parents use the permissive-indulgent approach by default because it initially creates the least resistance. Parents who don't like confrontation may back off and not define limits for their children because it's easier and more peaceful that way. Children and parents get along fine as long as the parents don't make demands or refuse requests.

Children raised by permissive-indulgent parents are the classic "spoiled" children. They tend to be noncompliant with other adults. They're demanding, low in self-reliance, and lack self-control. They don't set goals or enjoy responsible activities. They may be pleasant and well-behaved as long as things are going their way, but become easily frustrated when their desires aren't met.

What a Permissive-Indulgent Parent Is Like

- High on support and emotional nurturance.
- Low on structure and direction.

But not all permissive parents are also indulgent. Some are disengaged. These parents fail to provide not only structure but also adequate emotional support for their child. Disengaged parents may have started off being loving and firm, but along the way they became overwhelmed by their child's many strong, negative responses. They came to avoid the conflict by gradually checking out of their child's life emotionally. It's as if disengaged parents say to themselves, "No matter what I do, it doesn't work. If I'm nice to this kid, it doesn't help. If I try force my child to do what I want, my child just resists and things get worse."

Of all the parenting approaches, the disengaged style seems to have the most negative effect upon children. These children are at high risk for emotional and behavioral problems, academic difficulties, low self-esteem, and alcohol or substance abuse.

Like the authoritarian parent, the permissive parent doesn't act one way all the time. The permissive-indulgent parent provides some structure and direction at times, and the disengaged parent can be supportive and set boundaries at times. The problem, however, is that the child doesn't get enough support and direction from a disengaged parent or enough structure from a permissive-indulgent parent.

What a Disengaged Parent Is Like

- Low on support and nurturing.
- Low on structure and direction.

Why We Parent the Way We Do

What determines the way we parent? The reasons are numerous and complex, of course, but two factors stand out.

1. Everyday stress affects the way we parent. We often depart from our usual style of parenting when we're feeling extra pressures. An authoritarian father, for example, struggling with a big project at work may not have the energy to enforce his daughter's usual homework time in the evening. Likewise, a permissive father in the same situation may want peaceful time alone when he gets home and angrily order the children to bed early. Even an authoritative parent sometimes exerts strong power or becomes indulgent after a stressful day. Parents don't behave with complete consistency. Day-to-day events can affect us one way at one time and another way the next.

Parenting expert Thomas Gordon notes that such inconsistency is part of life and it's important to accept this to a certain degree.[7] We shouldn't beat up on ourselves when we blow it. Instead, we can forgive ourselves and move on.

Some parents, however, bounce around between authoritarian, permissive-indulgent, and disengaged styles in inconsistent, unpredictable ways. They might deal with their child's actions very differently from one time to the next. For example, one night a parent might spank a child for refusing to clean up a mess, and on another night, ignore the mess and the child. Children in this situation become tense, since they never know what to expect.

Another common and often destructive stress occurs when two parents have different approaches. It's not unusual for fathers to have a somewhat more authoritarian style while mothers may be more permissive, but when these differences are marked, conflict is inevitable. Disagreements about parenting can strain a marriage and continue even after divorce. And they always increase a child's hard-to-handle behavior. If you and your child's other parent have clear differences in parenting styles, consulting with a child mental health professional is strongly recommended. Major parenting disagreements are frequently difficult to resolve without help, and too much inconsistency and conflict works against helping your hard-to-handle child change.

2. **We are influenced by the way we were parented.** Adults tend to raise their children the same way they themselves were raised. Sometimes, however, we may parent the exact opposite of how we were raised. For example, a father who felt his parents were too strict may go to the other extreme and be too permissive with his children. Even though this father consciously chooses to parent differently than his parents did, he finds that he reverts to periodic outbursts of authoritarian parenting, especially when he's stressed. Then he feels bad, and his children are confused.

Learning an authoritative parenting style can be difficult if you've been raised in a predominantly permissive or authoritarian framework, but with practice and commitment, you can learn difficult tasks that don't come naturally. It's like learning how to ride a bicycle or any other complex skill. With commitment and practice, we all can accomplish challenging things.

Check It Out

Growing Up Again: Parenting Ourselves, Parenting Our Children by Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 1998). This well-researched book lets parents know that they don't have to parent their children the way they were parented.

Notes:

1. Diana Baumrind has written extensively on the three styles of parenting. For more information, see:

   Baumrind, D. (1966). "Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Children." *Child Development*, 37, 887–907.
   ———. (1967). "Childcare Practices Anteceding Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior." *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 75, 43–88.
   ———. (1968). "Authoritarian Versus Authoritative Parental Control." *Adolescence*, 8, 255–272.
   ———. (1971). "Current Patterns of Parental Authority." *Developmental Psychology Monograph*, 4, 1–103.
   ———. (1993). "The Average Expectable Environment Is Not Good Enough: A Reply to Scarr." *Child Development*, 64, 1299–1317.

2. The information for this informal self-examination is adapted with permission from Baumrind, D. (1967). "Childcare Practices Anteceding Three Patterns of Preschool Behavior." *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 75, 43-88; and Jaffee, M.L. (1997). *Understanding Parenting*, second edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

3. Parenting style is not the only factor that influences these positive outcomes. Temperament and other experiences also influence behavior, as discussed in chapter 2. While authoritative parenting is associated in general with positive outcomes for children, it may be especially important in helping hard-to-handle children develop appropriately.

4. Gordon, T. (1975). *Parent Effectiveness Training*. New York: Plume.

CHAPTER 5

Nurturing and Supporting Your Child

American humorist Garrison Keillor said, "Nothing you do for children is ever wasted." The best thing we can do for our children is to be nurturing and supportive. This means responding to our children's needs without any strings attached. Listening to them, spending time with them, taking them seriously—parents owe their children these things unconditionally.

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Although all children need direction and structure as well as support, hard-to-handle children often receive many more directive messages than nurturing ones—and sometimes far more negative responses than positive. The more negative responses they receive, the worse they feel about themselves. And in return, they act up even more. We can help break this cycle by consciously being supportive and building a more loving relationship with our hard-to-handle child. Structure and discipline become more effective when they are based on a solid parent-child relationship. Our children need to know that they can count on us for love and support at *any* time and that they don't have to *earn* these through their behavior.

There are many, many ways you can nurture and support your child. Here are three of the best:

1. Listening
2. Sensory messages (positive eye contact, smiles, positive words and tone of voice, comforting tastes and smells, loving touch)
3. Individual attention

Support Through Listening

At the heart of a nurturing relationship is open, honest communication. Open communication expresses deep respect for our children and involves give-and-take. We need to *listen* to our children, as well as talk to them. Effective listening shows that we respect our children enough to want to know their thoughts and feelings, joys and sorrows. We take them seriously as individuals, which helps them develop self-respect as worthwhile people who have something to contribute.

We need to be interested when our children tell us about their day at school, what happened on the swingset, or the latest Disney movie. When listening to a child, we need to show the same courtesy that we do with a friend, whether we really have an interest in Rachel's newest Barbie or how to win at Nintendo. If it really isn't

a good time for us to listen, we can politely say, "We can talk more later, but I have to return a phone call right now." This is a much more supportive and respectful response than saying, "That's enough, I've got other things to do," or simply walking off.

We especially need to listen when our child communicates a problem. If we don't first listen to our child, we won't know how to respond effectively. Effective listening involves paying attention not only to what the child *says*, but also to what the child *does*. We all become uncertain and don't speak directly when we're troubled, but this is particularly true of children. Instead of saying, "I'm mad because you won't let me visit my friend," a child may become irritable, withdrawn, or resistant. Rather than saying, "I'm scared," a child may burst into tears.

We need to pay attention to the uncertain message coming through our child's behavior and attempt to discover the feelings that underlie it. Try to put yourself in your child's place and imagine how your child might be feeling. Listen to what your child says, listen to your child's body language, and only then try to express verbally what you think your child is feeling. For example:

KYLE: [*He slams the door as he comes in, scowls, and throws his books on the floor.*] Mrs. Johnson is the worst teacher I ever had! She put my name on the board three times and didn't let me go to recess!

MOM: I'll bet that really upset you and made you mad.

For most parents, this is *not* the first reaction. Most likely, we'd want to ask Kyle what he did to get in trouble. We'd want to know the facts so we can tell Kyle what he should have done, reprimand him, or maybe even blame Mrs. Johnson. In other words, we'd want to fix the situation and move on.

But that approach doesn't work in the long run. Instead, we first need to listen attentively, show our child we understand the problem, and accept our child's feelings about it. We need to do this *regardless of whether or not we agree with our child's feelings or the way our child acted in the situation.*

It's undeniably important that our children understand what they did wrong and take responsibility for it, but we need to be

sensitive to timing. Since the problem is our child's, our child gets to talk first, and we wait our turn. We need to listen sympathetically, make eye contact, nod appropriately, and reflect our child's feelings as we understand them.

Let's see where the conversation between Kyle and his mother goes next.

KYLE: You bet I'm mad. She blames me for everything!
MOM: I'm sure that's frustrating.
KYLE: Yeah, all I did was go sharpen my pencil a few times, and I accidentally knocked Anne's books off her desk on the way.
MOM: So you feel puzzled and upset about why Mrs. Johnson got so mad.
KYLE: She just doesn't understand how hard it is for me to stay in my seat. I just have to move or I'll go nuts!
MOM: And you're upset that Mrs. Johnson doesn't seem to get that.
KYLE: Yeah, she keeps telling me to sit down all the time, and other kids laugh at me.
MOM: That must really irritate and embarrass you.
KYLE: [*He starts to cry.*]
MOM: It looks like all this might be making you sad, too. [*She reaches out and rubs his shoulder.*]
KYLE: [*He draws closer.*] Mom, can you talk to her? Maybe she'll listen to you.
MOM: Maybe you and I can talk to her together because you know how you feel better than anybody else.
KYLE: [*He brightens up.*] Okay. Can you call her?
MOM: First thing tomorrow.

Several things happened between Kyle and his mother. First, since Kyle's mother really listened to him, Kyle eventually was able to recognize his feelings of frustration, irritation, embarrassment, and sadness, and talk about why he was feeling so upset. The example also illustrates what else effective listening can do.

Listening diffuses strong feelings. Before anyone—child or adult—can really think about a problem and attempt to solve it,

he or she must deal with his or her strong feelings. That's how all people work. When someone is upset and you start asking questions, lecturing, or fussing, the other person usually becomes even more upset ("Everyone's against me!") and even less able to articulate the problem, let alone think through potential solutions.

Listening allows children to discover more issues. What happened between Kyle and his mother also illustrates what can happen when we listen to our children and help them name their feelings. Kyle opened up about other things that were bothering him even more deeply than the obvious problem. While Kyle was initially angry about getting his name on the board and missing recess, by the end he was able to express that his underlying problem involved sadness and embarrassment about not being able to stay in his seat. Sometimes, our listening helps children discover other issues that are important to them, even though they didn't think of them at first.

Listening encourages children to create solutions. By listening to Kyle and prompting him to talk through the problem, Mom let Kyle come up with a plan. He asked her to call his teacher. When we allow our children to talk about a problem while we listen and express what we understand, it frees our children to work through their feelings and think about solutions on their own. When children solve their own problems, they feel good about themselves, and they feel some control over their difficulty.

Of course, every conversation doesn't always work out as well as the one between Kyle and his mother did. Our child may come up with no course of action, raise no additional problems, and be at a loss to understand why the teacher put his or her name on the board. Frustrated, we may be tempted to point out immediately what our child did wrong and what he or she should have done differently. But be patient. Remember, timing is critical. Children need to be receptive to learning what you have to offer.

So wait until a little later. Wait until *after* the emotions have settled. Then you might approach your child and say something like, "You know, I've been thinking about the problem between

you and Mrs. Johnson, and I wonder what would happen if you sharpened three or four pencils at the beginning of class instead of walking back and forth to the pencil sharpener." You offer a possible solution for your child to consider, present the idea in a way that encourages your child to listen to you, and don't force the solution on the child.

When we listen to our children, they're more likely to listen to us. Our children won't always accept our solution—after all, the problem is our child's, not ours. Our child might say, "No, that won't help." But somewhere in the back of his or her mind, an idea might register. And, who knows, your child might even decide to sharpen pencils before class one day to see what happens. Offering your assistance in a respectful way helps your child feel good about you and strengthens your relationship.

Check It Out

P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training: The Tested New Way to Raise Responsible Children by Thomas Gordon (New York: New American Library, 1990). A noted parenting expert gives practical ideas on how to listen so children will talk and how to improve your listening skills.

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, 1980). This book by international experts on parent-child communication is filled with strategies, down-to-earth dialogues, and flat-out sound advice.

Listening is a valuable freebie that we cannot overestimate. Listening even briefly to a child's problem sometimes helps the child deal with it and move on, especially with minor difficulties. Once when I was watching my 6-year-old nephew and 9-year-old niece, Mark became upset with his sister Allison. He looked distressed and said, "Allison won't play with me!" I looked at him sympathetically and said something like, "I'll bet that makes you mad." "Yeah," he said, and then he took his Legos into the den and happily played by himself. Being listened to—even briefly—seemed to decrease the negative feeling and freed Mark to move on rather than remain angry.

Even situations that initially appear difficult may turn out easier than expected when we learn how to listen well. After all, the problem belongs to the child. Our child is the one who's upset, and we can be supportive.

But when the child's problem creates difficulties for us, it's often a different story. For example:

FATHER: [*Calling outside.*] Jessica, come in now. It's time to do your homework.

JESSICA: I'm not doing my homework until I finish playing!

FATHER: I know it irritates you to have to stop what you're doing and come in.

That's not how parents usually respond. When our children act like Jessica, we see their comeback as defiant and disrespectful. Our stress level rises and we want to take action right away. We often pass over the child's problem (not wanting to interrupt play) and focus on ours (wanting our child to complete the homework and to respond respectfully). When our anger combines with our child's irritation, emotions can escalate quickly.

In order to deal with problems that affect us and our children, we first need to listen *briefly* and reflect on our child's feelings. After all, adults must handle a child's needs before they can deal with their own. Sometimes simply acknowledging the irritation and respecting our child's right to feel a certain way leads the child to comply.

What if the child complies but with loud complaint? Again, allowing our child to dislike something sometimes encourages cooperation without our having to take strong action. When that doesn't work, we can try other approaches (see chapter 7). We also can decide to deal later with our child's defiance, since we can't always solve everything at once.

Listening is both a passive and an active process. Passive responses include looking at our children when they are talking, being silent so they can speak, and nodding in agreement with what they're saying. We also can say things like, "Oh, I see," "Uh-huh," and "Tell me more about that." These responses are important because they tell our children that we're listening.

But to be most helpful, listening must be active in communicating not only our willingness to listen, but also our understanding. We need to summarize what we think our children are saying, with something like, "You feel _____ about _____."

How do you know what children are feeling when they're not actually telling you? Look for the message behind the words and behavior. Name it, and tell your child what you're seeing. Naming feelings is important, especially for young children who know they feel uncomfortable about what's happening but may not know how to talk about it. Labeling a feeling as anger, for example, may lead our children to realize, "Oh, so that's what this is called."

There is power and comfort in naming something, even if we don't fully understand the label itself. When my older daughter, Christi, was about 2, I went to Miami on a business trip for several days. This was her first experience apart from me overnight. While I was gone, she'd often ask my wife, "Where'd Daddy go?" My wife would respond, "Daddy's gone to Miami, he'll be back later." Later my wife told me that she could hear Christi talking to herself, saying, "Daddy's gone to my ami, he be back in a widdle bit."

Christi didn't know Miami from Brussels sprouts, but because my wife gave her a label to explain the situation, Christi could better handle the separation. Once children can name their feelings, they will learn how to *talk about* their feelings rather than simply act them out. When children talk and parents listen, problems can be worked out with much less difficulty.

What if you label your child's feelings incorrectly? That can happen. Usually, however, your child will let us know, "No, that's not it," or "I'm not mad." When this happens, listen again. What else could he or she be feeling? Once you find the correct name, your child might say, "Yeah!" or "That's right!" and you can move from there. If you name the feeling correctly and listen, your child will most likely keep talking. The more your child talks, the more likely he or she is to develop ways of handling the problem, sometimes without your assistance.

Keys to Effective Listening

- Look at your child while he or she is talking.
- Be silent so your child can speak.
- Let your child know you are listening by nodding, saying, "Uh-huh," or "Tell me more."
- Check to see if you've understood by summarizing what you think your child has said.
- Look for the feelings behind your child's words and behavior. Help your child name his or her feelings.
- Encourage your child to come up with ways to resolve the problem.

Effective listening takes a lot of practice. Keep practicing until the process becomes more natural. You also can practice this type of listening with your spouse, friends, coworkers, and other adults, since it works with everyone—not just children.

One final point about effective listening. You have to be in a reasonably accepting frame of mind to do it. Sometimes it's not practical. Your child comes in, three pots are boiling away on the stove, your 2-year-old has just pulled the hem out of your skirt, and your golden retriever has knocked half the silverware off the table by wagging his tail. At that point, you're probably not going to be an effective listener. You'd be better off to say, "I know you're really mad right now, and I'd like to hear about it. Let's talk after supper, because I can't listen to you right now." We need to recognize that we're human, too. Our own needs and issues sometimes stand in the way of our ability to respond to our children. If we really *can't* listen, it's best not to try.

Most children are willing to be put on hold for a while. Some of the steam might go out in the meantime, but that's a risk you have to take at times. It's far better to choose a later time to discuss the situation rather than become impatient and distracted. Then it's absolutely essential that you reinitiate the conversation at the appointed time to show your child you take his or her issues seriously.

Support Through Sensory Messages

While effective listening is an important aspect of support, we can also offer children loving sensory messages. Everyone understands the world through the five senses. By giving supportive messages to our children through all their senses, we can communicate unconditional acceptance.

Positive eye contact and smiles. When we smile at our children and establish positive eye contact, we communicate good feeling. Eye contact intensifies the emotions we express. If we look directly at people when we're angry at them, they experience our feeling more strongly than if we look away. The same is true with positive feelings. If we look at our children with a smile in our eyes and on our face, they sense our pleasure more fully. So look fondly at your children whenever you can—while they're playing, when they come into the room, or when they get home from school.

Positive words and tone of voice. Not only is it important for children to see that we like them, but they also need to *hear* it. The words we use with each other carry a lot of weight. Words ring in our ears, sometimes indefinitely. Even now, you probably still remember destructive or uplifting remarks your parents made to you years ago.

Positive comments support and nurture our children emotionally. Simple phrases such as "I really do love you," "I like you," and "You're special to me" are powerful. And when our tone of voice matches our words, the message is clear. When you say, "You're special," in a distracted tone, you probably won't convince your child you think she's the greatest. But saying, "You little monkey," in an affectionate, smiling voice might do it. Your singing while peeling potatoes or putting your child to bed at night and the sound of your laughter can also provide feelings of support and pleasant memories for your child.

Kind words can be short and easy to speak,
but their echoes are truly endless.

—Mother Teresa

Comforting tastes and smells. Brownies baking in the oven, your perfume or aftershave, fresh-cut roses on the table, the chicken noodle soup you make when children are sick, and that special birthday cake you bake—aromas and flavors have strong associations for children and adults alike. The tastes and smells your children connect with you and your home often feel supportive and comforting.

Loving touch. Touch is a powerful communicator. Skin is our largest sense organ, and we receive many messages about the world, both positive and negative, through it. We usually find it easy to touch young children, and they often seek us out for cuddling and hugging and holding hands. We tend to forget, however, that older children still need to be touched by us in pleasant ways. Of course the frequency, form, and timing of supportive touch changes through the years; we're not going to bounce a 10-year-old on our knee or hug a 12-year-old in front of his friends at the skating rink. But even older children seldom resist a hug or a pat on the shoulder in private.

Children differ in their apparent need for and responsiveness to touch, even from very early in life. For example, some babies don't seem to enjoy being held for long periods of time. Don't smother a child with physical affection if he or she doesn't enjoy it. Just gauge your touch by your child's reaction. If your child tends to stiffen and pull away from you, you may be coming on too strong. If your child nestles into you, then you know that your child welcomes your touch.

It's rare for anyone not to respond positively to some form of good touch, perhaps a full body hug, a pat on the back, a gentle touch on a shoulder, or an affectionate punch on the arm. The important point is not the type of touch, but rather touching in ways your child responds well to.

When children receive positive messages through many different senses at the same time, the impact is even greater. So, the next time you hug your child, also look pleasantly at her or him, smile, and say in a genuine tone, "You're special to me."

Support Through Individual Attention

Parents support their children through family activities, such as eating dinner together, taking a walk, seeing a movie, or going to the beach. Family activities can strengthen the relationship between parents and children, and children often view these opportunities as nurturing and supportive.

The deepest relationships between parents and children, however, develop through one-to-one contact. We see how this works in adult relationships. People would probably never marry if they could date only in groups. It requires individual interaction to get to know each other well enough to decide to commit. People also need one-to-one time in order to form close relationships with friends.

One-to-one time is essential for developing a close relationship with a child. People often say, "It's not the quantity of time we spend with kids, but the quality." But that's not necessarily so. Kids need both. Children need regular individual time with their parents.

This isn't easy, of course. How can you focus individually on each child if both parents work full-time, your three kids are in Scouts and baseball, and you have to take care of the house, the yard, and the car?

Yet we all find time for other things that are important to us. If we have a hobby, we grab an few minutes or an hour here and there to enjoy it. Giving our children enough individual attention doesn't require hours every day. Ten minutes here or 15 minutes there of regular, focused time has a positive cumulative effect. And it doesn't require travel or money. We're talking about simple pleasures, activities that can be done at home, such as watching our children play or tossing a ball back and forth or cooking dinner together.

While a lack of positive, one-to-one experiences with your children has a negative impact on them, it creates unpleasant consequences for you, too. Parents who don't spend enough positive time with their children when they are young often end up spending a lot of negative time with their children when they get older. Trips to the principal's office and fielding calls from other parents irate over your child's behavior can take up hours. Better to set aside time *with* a child sooner than be summoned *about* the child later. The quantity and quality of the time you spend with your child when she's young will probably affect your relationship when she becomes an adult. As the saying goes, "Be kind to your children. They pick your nursing home."

Though we can catch moments with our children here and there, it works best to plan regular activities. You can still be spontaneous, of course, but it's too easy to let things slide without a definite commitment. Start when your child is young (from birth to about age 8 or 9) by spending at least 15 to 20 minutes every day or two focusing individually on your child at home. Signal this time by saying something like, "Well, it's our special time together. What would you like to do?"

Let your child set the agenda. Participate if you're invited to and observe if you're not. In imaginative play, your child may assign you a character role, or you may get to be the narrator, describing what's happening with appropriate emotion. Sometimes children want their parents just to watch. When that's the case, be an active observer. If your child has toy animals playing tag, for example, you might comment, "Boy, they're really running after each other." "Oops, the tiger almost got caught that time." "Now here comes the giraffe." If your child asks you to play too, follow your child's lead. This isn't the moment for you to teach lessons, ask a lot of questions, or direct the play into an area you'd find more fun.

As adults, we're good at taking over activities with kids. We have more experience and think we know best. If you want to teach lessons, however, do it on your time, not your child's. The same is true when playing an organized game. If your child changes the rules, go with the changes. You can comment matter-of-factly on what your child has done and ask him to explain the

new rules to you. Remember: In these one-to-one times, your child leads the way; you follow.

Children seldom get permission to call the shots. Usually, it's the adults who give lots of directions. In fact, research has shown that parents of hard-to-handle kids give more directions than parents of children who are more easygoing. Your positive individual time gives your child a regular opportunity to take charge—with permission—and for you to go along. Children who are never permitted to lead the way may take the lead anyway by being defiant and demanding.

As children grow older, their attention gets taken up by more out-of-home influences, such as daily homework, friends, and extracurricular activities. With children ages 8 to 12, then, one-to-one time may be harder to find. You may have to be more creative about working out a schedule for you and your child. For example, talking during a meal or going to a soccer practice may provide opportunities to be together. Your activities will probably evolve from imaginative play to more structured pursuits—playing a game, working on a project, or playing with a pet.

In addition to the daily routines we develop, we also can schedule more extended times alone with our children. For example, a family with two parents and two children in the home can set aside parent-child time each week. One week, one parent does an activity with one child while the other does something with the other child. The next week, they switch partners.

When there are more children in the house than adults, scheduling time with each child can become more complicated, especially if you're a single parent. In these circumstances, consider teaming up with other parents. One can provide child care while another has individual parent-child time, and you can trade off.

When you begin to spend individual time with your hard-to-handle child, your child may become more demanding at first. That's because your child is so used to being negative and dramatic that he or she hasn't relaxed enough to experience this time in a truly positive way. When this happens, calmly say, "I'll have to leave if you yell at me again." Then follow through. If your child yells again, say, "I'm going to go in the other room for a few minutes.

Then I'll come back and see if we can continue." Exit immediately and calmly, disregarding any pleas to return.

After two minutes, ask your child if he or she is ready to try again. If your child is still angry, give it another minute or two and ask again. If too many minutes are taken up with your coming and going, stop at the end of that time and say, "Well, I'm sorry that the time we were to have together is all up. We'll try it again tomorrow." Then stop talking and leave the room. Acknowledge your child's irritation but don't lecture. Your leaving says all that needs to be said. The next day, initiate individual activity with your child again. Being consistent about spending one-to-one time together is important, even when it's hard. By doing so, you'll give your child the message that you'll hang in there, even though the road may be rocky at first.

If you don't think you have 15 minutes to spend with your child each day, think again. How much time do you already spend dealing with your child's problem behaviors? While it may seem more time-consuming at first, you'll probably spend less time dealing with problems when you devote more time to positive interaction. So, it's a matter of how you want to spend your time—because you will spend it, one way or another.

Illness, moves, job changes, and other situations can make it impossible to have daily time with your child. But even if you can't spend regular time together, some time is important. This is particularly true during periods of family change when children undoubtedly need more security and support.

In growing up, a child should know some joy each day and look forward to some joyous event for the morrow.

—Nicholas Hobbs

Supporting and nurturing our children is vital. We do it with other adults all the time. We listen attentively. We smile. We react to what others are saying at an appropriate emotional level. We're polite. Although we know that these behaviors improve interactions, we tend to forget that they have the same benefit at home.

We don't necessarily have to learn any new skills; we just need to apply what we already know with those who are closest to us. In doing so, we build a strong foundation on which we can base effective structure and direction.

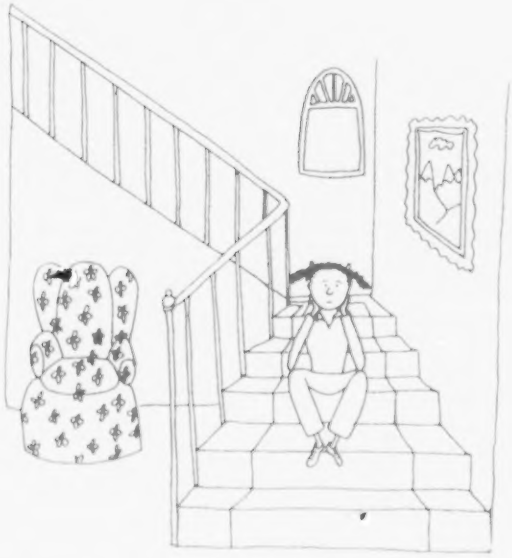
Notes:

1. Much of the information about listening skills is based on the work of Thomas Gordon. (1975). *P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training: The Tested New Way to Raise Responsible Children*. New York: Plume.

2. Dadds, M.R. (1997). "Conduct Disorder," in Ammerman, R.T. & M. Hersen. *Handbook of Prevention and Treatment with Children and Adolescents*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 521–550.

CHAPTER 6

Providing Direction and Structure for Your Child



Nurturing is essential for children, but it's not enough. Children also need structure and direction. They need to learn limits and standards in order to feel safe and secure and to make their way responsibly in the world. Our job as parents is to provide this structure for our children when they are young and to help them internalize limits and boundaries.

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Direction and structure help children deal with the demands life places on them. Being able to comply with certain societal norms, for example, is an important part of living with others. People who constantly defy limits and boundaries experience many difficulties that complicate their lives—at home, in relationships, and in society at large. The goal of teaching children compliance, however, is not to create a generation of passive people who always do what they're told. Children who are taught by authoritarian parents to be submissive often miss out on opportunities to internalize the structure their parents provide. They may grow up to be overcommitted adults who can't say no.

Most parents, though, want their children to learn to stand up for themselves when it's appropriate, and to do that, children need practice. Our goal as authoritative parents is to teach children how to *balance* compliance and assertiveness, as well as other skills they need in order to live responsibly and happily with themselves and other human beings. This type of parental teaching is usually referred to as *discipline*. Unfortunately many people in our society think that discipline means "to punish." Yet *discipline* actually comes from *discere*, the Latin word meaning "to learn." Discipline, then, refers to the wide range of ways we can help our children learn what's important to their lives both now and in the future.

What Makes Discipline Work

Psychologist Jerry Bigner has nicely summarized four features of effective discipline:

1. Discipline teaches children how to act. Through effective discipline, children learn to internalize the rules, values, and beliefs that will benefit themselves and others. But before children can *internalize*, parents must first *externalize* by openly laying out rules, values, and beliefs—in both words and actions—when children are young. As parents consistently provide these external messages about behavior over the growing years, they become an

integral part of the child. As children become older, they begin to direct their own actions rather than requiring a parent to do so.

2. Discipline teaches children how to control their impulses. Developing self-control is particularly difficult for children who have intense emotions and actions. Children who act impulsively tend to make poor decisions because they act before they think. We want to help our children learn how to make good choices—to think before they act. We want them to avoid the negative consequences of impulsive actions and develop the skills they need to succeed in relationships, school, work, and other important aspects of life.

3. Effective discipline is reasonable. In general, effective discipline is strongly positive and moderately negative. In other words, we need to increase the volume on positive feedback and turn down the volume on negative feedback. Yes, negative approaches are necessary at times, but we don't have to overreact with negative feedback every time children misbehave.

4. Effective discipline is developmentally appropriate. Discipline methods that work with a 4-year-old are *not* going to work with a 12-year-old. As parents, we need to educate ourselves about which methods work best for which ages. For example, young children respond best to action. Trying to reason with a preschooler will not get you far. With a child who is about to become a teenager, you can more successfully use reason. But even older children do not always respond to logic, especially when their emotions are intense.

We can integrate these features of effective discipline into the direction and structure we provide our children. As we develop our own consistent methods of teaching our children to become self-disciplined, we can think about providing structure in three ways: preventing problems in the first place, giving instructions and stating expectations effectively, and reinforcing what we're

trying to teach. Each of these approaches is useful, but incorporating all three into our repertoire of strategies yields the best results.

Prevent Problems

We may as well admit it—a hard-to-handle child's behavior is often predictable. A tired child is more disagreeable than one who's rested. Difficulties increase during the evenings when parents and children are tired. We can usually predict when problems might arise. The good news is that when we can anticipate problems, we can plan how to deal with them. There are many ways to prevent problems.

Identify appropriate expectations. If what you expect of your child isn't appropriate for your child's developmental stage, you're likely to see conflict. Take chores, for example. With help and direction, a 2-year-old can help pick up toys, but toddlers probably won't do so on their own. Older children can help develop a list of family chores. When children have a say in their activities, they're more likely to follow through on them.

Having realistic expectations of our children involves training and supervising them. Too often we become impatient with our children's clumsy attempts to help and excuse them from responsibilities by picking up the slack. Children like to help, but if their efforts are always discounted they may begin to feel incompetent and be less likely to try in the future. They may also learn to act dumb so you'll take over and relieve them.

When teaching a chore, begin by having children watch you do the chore first. Then walk them step-by-step through the process—and support their efforts. Provide child-sized equipment such as small brooms, dustpans, and gardening tools. Chores become most effective when children do them while other family members are also doing chores. If you work to create a sense of camaraderie, everyone can benefit from talking during chores, listening to music, taking brief breaks together, or going out to lunch when everything is done.

Four Tips for Preventing Problems

1. Keep your child from getting too hungry.
2. Keep your child from getting too tired.
3. Keep stress at manageable levels.
4. Keep evening activities relatively few in number and not overly stimulating.

Set a positive example. Children watch us carefully and observe not only our actions but also our attitudes. In the way we act, we teach what's important to us and what we believe to be right and wrong. When what we say about something is different from what we *do* about it, children pay more attention to our actions than our words.

We can model cooperation by being cooperative with our children. How many times have we told our children "Not now" without really thinking about it? The truth is, we can usually take a break from what we're doing to help our child. But if we really can't right then, we can model a more cooperative response. Let's say you're up to your armpits in leaf piles in the yard. Your child asks, "Can you fix my bike?" Instead of saying, "Later" (we all know what that means!), say, "I can't stop right now, but I'll fix your bike after lunch."

If your child asks you something you're unsure about, avoid the automatic no. Children need to know that their requests are worthy of serious consideration. If you always answer too quickly, your child may observe that you didn't even *think* about it before responding. It's okay to say something like, "I can't say yes or no right now. I'll have to think about it and let you know before bedtime."

The way we give instructions says a lot about who we are and what we think. It takes little to say please and thank you and to use a courteous but firm voice when giving directions. It's better to say, "It's very important that your room be picked up before your friend comes to spend the night, so please do it *now*," than to yell, "How many times do I have to tell you to clean up your room! Do it now!"

We also set an example by how we relate to other adults. Children observe how adults interact with each other. How do we deal with disagreements? Are we respectful and assertive or harsh and aggressive? Do we argue openly or withdraw in a passive, quietly hostile manner? Do we pretend to agree to avoid a conflict, and then say something different later?

Conflicts can run especially high between parents who are separated or divorced. Arguing may be open and volatile. Mom may ask the children what's going on at Dad's house. Dad may say negative things about Mom, or Mom and Dad may give too much detail about conflicts. Sometimes parents expect a child to be a messenger: "Tell your father I said...." Whatever we might think about the other parent, *these behaviors are extremely destructive to children and to our relationships with them.* Period. Exclamation point!

No matter what we want our children to learn, we need to pay close attention to our actions. If we chronically blame others for our problems, then we can bet that our children will, too. If we want our children to deal with conflict reasonably and respectfully, then it's important that we handle conflict in the same manner. We tend to get what we give.

Teach children your values. We often think of values in the context of a religious or spiritual life, but regardless of our personal beliefs, values are important for everyone. Those who aren't affiliated with a religious community can explicitly teach values in an ethical, humanistic framework. Many societies agree on basic values such as respect, honesty, fairness, and kindness.

Parents can use everyday situations to discuss ethical issues. When watching television with your child, you can talk about appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in the show. When a character acts in a way you value, point that out and emphasize the advantages of that action. Likewise, when a character makes a poor choice, talk about other ways the character could have acted that fit more in line with your values. Commercial breaks can provide opportunities for this kind of teaching. Some families do this by using the mute button as a time for family discussions about the show.

Check It Out

For Parents:

Teaching Your Children Values by Linda and Richard Eyre (New York: Fireside, 1993). Focuses on how to teach values such as honesty, courage, respect, dependability, and more.

Raising Good Children: From Birth Through the Teenage Years by Thomas Lickona (New York: Bantam Books, 1983). Shows how moral development evolves in a child and how parents can encourage it.

For Children:

The Berenstain Bears and the Truth by Stan and Jan Berenstain (New York: Random House, 1983). Illustrates how parents handle lying and truth-telling in a family. Ages 3 to 8.

The Complete Tales by Beatrix Potter (London: Penguin Group, 1989). Illustrates many different values. Any story by Beatrix Potter deals with values in creative ways through animal characters, such as Peter Rabbit, Tom Kitten, and Squirrel Nutkin. Ages 3 and up.

I'm Like You, You're Like Me: A Child's Book About Understanding and Celebrating Each Other by Cindy Gainer (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998). Explores important topics like talking, listening, feelings, and cooperation in basic terms that even young children can understand. Ages 3 to 8.

Love You Forever by Robert Munsch (Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly Books, 1986). A story about a boy growing up and how love crosses the generations—and time. Ages 6 and up.

The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams (New York: Random House, 1985). Illustrates what it means to be human. Ages 6 and up.

We Can Get Along: A Child's Book of Choices by Lauren Murphy Payne and Claudia Rohling (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1997). Explains how it feels when people get along well together and when they do not. Ages 3 to 8.

What Do You Stand For? A Kid's Guide to Building Character by Barbara Lewis (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1998). Guides young people in exploring their values through activities, anecdotes, and suggestions. Ages 11 and up.

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Teaching values is most effective when we can combine our example with our instruction. Some children take longer than others to internalize their own values, but with consistent modeling and instruction, most children will develop a system of values that directs their lives, at least most of the time.

Change the environment. Another way to head off trouble is by changing a child's physical environment. This is particularly important for young children. If you don't want a 3-year-old to explore certain things, put them out of reach. Provide objects that are safe and interesting for the child to explore. Childproofing is important, not only for safety, but also to prevent frequent "Don't do that!" interactions between you and your child.

Controlling the types and numbers of toys and activities also can prevent problems for hard-to-handle children. Many hard-to-handle children become overstimulated by too many exciting things in their world, especially if these activities make them aggressive. According to the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, seeing a lot of violence on television, in the movies, and in video games can lead children to behave aggressively. Likewise, unlimited access to toy guns and knives may encourage aggression toward other children and their parents. Although it's normal for children to play aggressively or enjoy action entertainment, parents need to manage it. It's one thing for parents to supervise a child's occasional use of toy guns and aggressive television, but it's quite another to allow a child free, unsupervised access.

The types of aggressive toys and media experiences also make a difference. Simulated automatic weapons of mass destruction may encourage more aggressive play than cowboy guns. Likewise, seeing Tweety Bird hit Sylvester over the head with a wooden hammer tends to arouse less aggressiveness than watching people's heads being blown off by machine-gun fire.

What are helpful parameters in this area? I recommend allowing children younger than 8 no more than a half hour a day of aggressive video games or television, and children 8 to 12 no more than an hour. It's also important to emphasize to kids that aggressive play is just that: *play*. Parents need to help children put it into

context. Aggression should not be used to interact with other people or to solve problems. The best advice is to see how your child reacts after playing with these toys or watching aggressive shows. If you note a connection between such activities and difficult behavior, reduce your child's exposure to aggressive toys and programs even further.

Some children are easily overstimulated by any activity, not just those involving aggression. These children may be more on edge than other children, and they respond negatively when demands are placed on them. It's best to simplify their lives so they don't become overwhelmed by too many toys and activities.

For example, if your child has a large number of toys, you might put half of them in storage. Don't treat this as punishment. Simply limit access to toys. If your child wants a toy from storage, he or she must put another toy away. (Supervise all trades, if the child has access to the storage area, everything will be back in the room in no time.)

Children also need help managing the number of their activities. We need to help our children learn not to overcommit themselves. Children may not like the limits we set, especially if their friends have different limits. When this happens, we can listen sympathetically to our child and then respond, "Yes, I know it makes you mad because I won't let you do things that your friends do," but hold the line.

Monitor behavior. Some problems can be prevented with appropriate supervision. When hard-to-handle youngsters have a lot of unmonitored time, the risk of antisocial behavior increases. That's why it's important for parents of hard-to-handle children to monitor their children closely.

There are no clear rules for deciding how much unsupervised time is healthy for hard-to-handle children, but here are some general guidelines:

- **Preschool.** If the child is inside with you, check in every half hour, even if you don't suspect any problems. If things become very quiet, check right away. If the child is outside, check more frequently, especially if the play area isn't fenced.

- **Ages 6 to 9.** Children can begin to have less direct supervision, but you need to know where your children are and whom they are with at all times. Check on them every 45 minutes or so unless you're sure they're at someone's home with a supervising adult you trust.
- **Ages 10 to 12.** Children can begin to play out of earshot. However, checking in every hour or so is a good idea unless you know that another adult is supervising your child.
- **Ages 12 and up.** Many experts recommend that parents closely monitor children through early to midadolescence, which is from about age 13 to 15, especially for hard-to-handle children. Know where they are and who they are with.

These are broad guidelines. Of course if activities involve potential danger—such as swimming, playing near traffic, or being on playground equipment—you need to constantly monitor younger children. The true determining factor for your child should be how well your child handles unsupervised time—and for how long.

Although James was 11, his parents found that when he left earshot for more than an hour, he'd get in fights. So they set the expectation that James must check in, at least by phone, every 45 minutes or he has to come home. On the other hand, 8-year-old Susan gets along well with one particular friend, who is one of the few children she doesn't have conflict with. As a result, the two girls can play in the yard for an hour before Susan's parents feel a need to check on her.

Keeping up with a child takes a lot of time and energy. And parental monitoring frequently leads to conflict, since hard-to-handle children often resist direct supervision, especially as they get older. Again, we can listen sympathetically to our children's feelings, and remain firm. Hard-to-handle children do better when they don't have long, uninterrupted activities. They also do better when they have clearly designated play areas. This is especially true for boys, who tend to be outdoors and require more space for their play.

When children are invited to other children's homes, especially for sleepovers, make sure there will be adequate supervision. Call the parent and say, "My daughter tells me she's been invited to spend the night at your house, and I wanted to find out more about the activities that are planned. Is there anything I can help with?" You're not being intrusive; you're just ensuring that the time will go well. The more difficult your child is, the more monitoring is important.

Arrange for children to participate in organized activities. Organized activities, whether music lessons, artistic endeavors, clubs, or sports, give children experience in following directions. Activities run by adults whose values you respect can help support the guidance you give your child.

Be careful not to get children involved in too many activities, or force them into ones they don't want. Children need opportunities to play on their own and to play with their peers. Often one of the most effective ways for children to learn how to get along with others is to play with other children and figure out ways of resolving problems on a trial-and-error basis. Listen to children playing ball in the backyard. They may argue and call names, but they often end up negotiating a solution to whatever problems arise.

It's also a mistake to take our children's organized activities too seriously. We can end up pushing children to do their best until the activity is no longer fun. Yes, we need to encourage and support our children, but we also need to let them play—that's the real reason for doing these activities. As children get older and decide to invest significant time and effort in an organized activity, we can then emphasize practice, skill, and team commitment. But no matter why our children do the activities they do, they benefit most when our approaches and feedback are supportive.

Teach relaxation. Because a tense child will likely react with strong emotion to difficult situations, helping your hard-to-handle child learn to relax may reduce some of the tension that leads to problems.

Most relaxation techniques can be adapted for children, but a few seem especially helpful. One is the rag-doll technique, where

children imitate the loose, floppy movements of a rag doll. This works very well with young children. Suggesting that children lie in a loose state for at least a few minutes a couple of times a day may help to reduce their tension over time.

Or try the birthday-cake technique. Ask children to take a long, slow, deep breath and imagine themselves blowing out candles on an imaginary birthday cake. After releasing the breath, children calmly make a birthday wish and imagine the wish coming true. Other images also can be used, such as gliding through water. The point is to encourage children to use deep breathing as a relaxation technique and to think about positive, relaxing images. Not only does deep breathing help hard-to-handle children relax, it also can help them reduce anger. With older children, the technique of tightening and relaxing muscles may be helpful. (See page 43.)

Check It Out

Ready...Set...R.E.L.A.X. by Jeffrey Allen and Roger Klein (Watertown, WI: Inner Coaching, 1996). Presents a number of relaxation approaches that are helpful for hard-to-handle children.

State Expectations

In addition to preventing problems, we need to give directions appropriately. Children are more likely to follow through on clearly stated expectations than directions that are confusing and vague.

Watch your timing. It's easy to give children directions without considering what's going on in their lives at the moment. A child may be making an intricate origami butterfly when a parent charges in giving orders and expecting them to be followed right away. Being interrupted like that is difficult for anyone, not just children.

It's much more effective to give directions when our children aren't heavily engaged elsewhere. When children are in the middle of something, we can be respectful and give some lead time rather than springing demands on them. It's as simple as saying, "When this television show is over, please feed the cat."

Of course, sometimes children need to follow directions immediately, especially for health and safety reasons. The 4-year-old who is sitting on his baby brother must be told to get up right away. We also need to give directions quickly and strongly when our young child is going across the street: "Stop and look both ways!" But many of our directives aren't emergencies and can be given more respectfully.

Give choices whenever possible. When people have choices, they feel a sense of control and tend to respond better. Of course children shouldn't be given a choice whether or not to go to school, brush their teeth, take a bath, or go to bed at a reasonable hour. But giving them choices within the range of things they need to do respects their needs, too. You might ask, "Which would you rather do first, take your bath or brush your teeth?" Even though you are letting the child know that both activities must be done, allowing the child to choose the order gives him or her some influence.

You also can give children choices about time. "Will you do your homework now or after supper?" "Will you help set the table now or clear the table after dinner?" The more times you can think of a choice while giving directions, the more likely your child will comply.

Get your child's attention. When you want your child to do something, get down at your child's eye level, ask your child to look at you, and then state your direction. Sometimes touching your child also helps your child to focus on you.

You can even use humor as an attention-getter if your child responds well to humor—or if you have a hard time getting your child's attention. Blow a toy trumpet or call out, "Hear ye, hear ye! I hereby proclaim!" Be careful with humor, however. Trying to tease an angry child out of a bad mood can be tricky. If your child

responds positively and starts laughing, then it's okay. Otherwise, your child may feel belittled, and the situation could become worse.

Eliminate distractions. It's not very effective to give directions to children when they're playing or when there's a lot of other noise. Even adults have trouble following directions when distracted.

You may have to take your child out of a distracting room before giving a directive, especially if it involves a number of steps. Or you may have to turn off the television so your child can hear you, if he or she doesn't do so when you ask.

Keep directions brief. Directions work best when they're clear and concrete. For young children, give only one direction at a time. Even for children 8 and older, two or three instructions at once are plenty. Be specific about *when* you want the direction followed (after the show, before dinner). Make your tone businesslike and direct, but not harsh. And look directly at your child, since eye contact emphasizes the importance.

Also use as few words as possible, especially with young children. Avoid long discussions about why you want the direction followed, but do give a brief explanation. Children are often more willing to do things when they understand the reasons.

It's also best to give directions as statements, not as questions. When you ask yes-or-no questions, you need to be willing to accept that your child could say no. In other words, don't say "Would you clear the table?" unless you're willing to accept the reply, "No, thanks. I've got other things to do."

Another effective strategy, especially with a young child, is to ask your child to repeat the direction. This way you know that your child heard you, and your child gets to hear the direction again in her or his own voice. Sometimes children listen better to themselves than to others.

Give directions on paper. When instructions are complex, your child is forgetful, or your child reacts strongly to oral directions, written instructions can be effective. Even nonreaders can follow simple directions on paper. You can tell preschoolers that

whenever they see a piece of paper with a toothbrush on it, they need to brush their teeth.

If you have more than one direction, write each on a separate sheet of paper or sticky note. For example, you might post a note in a chosen place, such as on the television, the refrigerator, or the bathroom mirror. After completing the task, the child can enjoy throwing the note away.

Take action. If your child doesn't follow a direction the first time, restate it while explaining the consequences that will occur if the instruction isn't followed. Then follow through with what you said. Your words will have little meaning if your child ignores your instructions and you don't enforce consequences. Likewise, when your child complies, give positive feedback.

Give Appropriate Feedback

No matter how well we anticipate problems and give effective directions, hard-to-handle children will frequently resist. From our children's point of view, directions can create a problem, and they often respond by acting up.

The most effective *initial* response you can make to a negative reaction is to listen briefly and try to understand your child's point of view. Don't get into an extended discussion unless you're willing to negotiate. For example: "I know you're irritated about having to stop what you're doing to take out the trash, and I understand that." Then pause for about five seconds. Sometimes your child will do what you want without further instruction. If not, say something like, "But the trash gets picked up tomorrow, and it must be taken out tonight."

Follow these general tips for giving effective feedback:

Give feedback immediately. The sooner you respond, the better. This is especially important with very young children, who, if they're rewarded or punished too long after the fact, miss the connection between their behavior and your feedback.

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Give feedback frequently. Frequent feedback helps your child change her or his behavior. This is an example of the old practice-makes-perfect rule. The more frequently children do what you want and receive feedback for it, the more quickly they will succeed in learning that behavior.

Emphasize positive feedback. People often point out problem behaviors instead of positive behaviors. Even as parents, it's easy to be blase when we're giving positive feedback and become intense and dramatic when we give negative feedback. However, the opposite is more effective. We need to give strong positive feedback and less-dramatic yet firm negative feedback.

Give feedback consistently. Every time our children act a certain way, we need to react the same way as much as possible. If we're inconsistent, we confuse our children, and most children don't learn well when they're confused. When a 2-year-old puffs up in anger, extends a lower lip, and slaps at you, saying, "Mean Mommy!" it can seem funny. But if we laugh, the child learns it's okay to hit. Or if we're tired and have had a bad day, we may yell, ignore misbehavior, or respond differently than we usually do. The child needs to know that it's not acceptable to hit, and you need to give that message as consistently as possible.

Stay with your feedback method. Many parents use appropriate feedback, but change methods when one doesn't work right away. Sometimes the problem is that they don't stick with any one approach long enough. Use the same feedback method for about two weeks consistently before evaluating the results. If it isn't working then, try something else.

Expect things to get worse before they get better. Any change, whether positive or negative, requires adjustment. Hard-to-handle kids may not respond well at first to our feedback. In fact, children become so accustomed to certain types of feedback from us that when we change our methods, they may act up even more than usual. That's because they want us to go back to the way

we've acted before. That's what they're used to. If we can ride out the storm, however, and stick with our approach, children's behavior typically improves over time.

Notes:

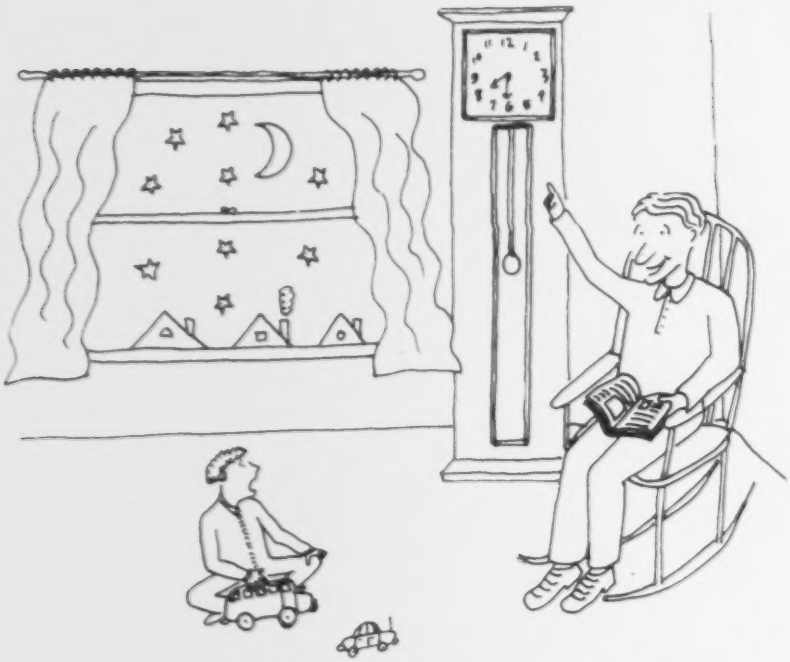
1. Bigner, J. (1996). *Parent-Child Relations: An Introduction to Parenting*, fourth edition. New York: Macmillan.

2. Patterson, G.R. (1982). *Coercive Family Process*. Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing Co.; Patterson, G.R., J.B. Reid & T.J. Dishion. (1992). *Antisocial Boys*. Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing Co.

3. Pitcher, E.G. & L.H. Schultz. (1983). *Boys and Girls at Play: The Development of Sex Roles*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

CHAPTER 7

Responding to Your Child's Behavior



Dealing with the intense behavior of hard-to-handle children is difficult. How do we respond effectively to our child's outbursts, manipulation, or defiance? For that matter, how do we respond when our child is cooperative, *not* difficult?

If children comply, we react one way. If children misbehave, we react another way. No matter how we respond, we are giving our

children feedback. The key is our learning to respond in more helpful ways. All children need input so they know how they're doing, and they take cues from the people around them. As children grow older and more experienced, they learn to monitor themselves and need less feedback from others. But people never become so self-sufficient that they no longer need or desire feedback.

This chapter looks at many different ways of responding to our children's behavior and discusses when they might be appropriate. (For information on which strategies work best at what ages, see the chart on page 119.)

Positive Social Feedback

Through positive social feedback—smiles and kind touches and words—parents teach children how to behave. Few people go through life without finding such feedback useful and even necessary. When we express approval to children after they follow directions, we increase the likelihood that they'll follow other directions in the future. Try to catch your children being good by noticing appropriate things they do on their own. For example, say, "I like the way you say please and thank you." "Thanks for playing so nicely with your brother."

Some children seem to crave social feedback even when it's negative. For example, many difficult children interrupt while their parents are talking on the phone. When parents fuss with the child, that attention is social feedback. Try rewarding children for a desired behavior instead. If your child lets you talk for a few minutes without interruption, ask the caller to excuse you for a moment. Thank your child sincerely for not interrupting.

Effective Ways to Encourage

Positive social feedback includes offering encouraging words. Learning to do this effectively can produce excellent effects. Parents often praise what their children do, saying, "That's great!"

and "What a terrific job you did." They think these phrases encourage children to repeat their positive behavior, and often they do. Parenting expert Don Dinkmeyer and his associates in the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) program, however, suggest that words of praise that evaluate performance overly emphasize feedback from others.[1] Children who are praised exclusively for the outcomes of their actions may get the message that they're worthwhile only when they do what they're asked and that they must please others in order to be okay.

Dinkmeyer suggests using words of encouragement that avoid vague evaluations (such as "good," "wonderful," "great"). Instead, be more specific:

- Recognize your child's interests: "I can tell you really liked learning about that" or "You seem to be enjoying yourself."
- Show your confidence in your child's ability: "You'll make it" or "I'll bet you can figure that one out yourself."
- Notice and appreciate your child's effort: "Thank you so much" or "Your help made a big difference."

Encouraging efforts is particularly important when you're trying to teach new or difficult behaviors. When you notice small efforts, your child will more likely feel encouraged, try harder, and therefore succeed. Children sometimes become discouraged and stop trying when they feel their efforts aren't noticed.

Suppose your daughter makes her bed, but not completely. You might say, "Thanks for working on the bed. I appreciate your effort." Then pause for a few moments before saying, "I'd now like you to straighten the sheets under the spread." Do not say "But you need to..." or "But that's not completely done." The word *but* tends to cancel out whatever immediately preceded it. Your child will focus on what she did wrong rather than hearing your recognition. When you pause between encouraging and giving directions, the encouragement has time to sink in.

Another potential problem with praise alone is that sometimes children don't agree with the evaluation. If you say their drawing is "great," they may think you're either not being truthful or not

smart enough to recognize that they didn't do a good job. Or they may think they got lucky this time but won't be able to do it again. In these cases, the praise, especially if it's overblown, may be *discouraging*.

Of course, many children respond positively to praise, especially if it's specific, and for most children a combination of praise and encouragement works. If your child doesn't respond well to traditional praise or tends to discount it, however, try more encouragement.

Many children learn to give themselves positive feedback about their efforts and performance as time goes on. You can help by suggesting to your children that *they* can feel good about their efforts and accomplishments. For example, you could say, "You got an A. I'm happy for you. You can be proud of how hard you worked."

Five Ways Encouragement Helps Children

Encouragement . . .

1. values and accepts children the way they are
2. does not push for a higher performance level
3. focuses on positive effort
4. helps children discover their own abilities
5. reinforces children's pride in what they've done

Of course, we live in a society that evaluates performance. It's unrealistic to think that children will never feel evaluated by others or that they will not evaluate themselves based on other people's feedback. But it's nice to hear some words that encourage without evaluating. That's what we can provide for our child at home.

Positive Concrete Feedback

For many hard-to-handle children, social feedback alone won't help them change. Especially when parents and children have been butting heads for a long time, it takes more time before parents and

children can consistently use and respond to positive social feedback. Some children also need more intensity than social feedback may provide. For these reasons, concrete rewards—tangible items or activities, such as small toys, money, extra telephone time, or renting a video—may be helpful. If you consistently pair positive social feedback and concrete rewards, you may be more likely to see changes in your children's behavior.

When choosing concrete rewards, consider these two factors:

1. **Know your children and their interests.** This isn't difficult with young children, but it can be with older children who spend less time with you. If you're not sure what your children value, ask them. And remember to check back with them—what was rewarding today may not be rewarding even a few weeks later.

2. **Consider what you can spend.** If you try to use rewards that are too time-consuming or expensive, you probably won't give them freely. Natural rewards, ones that don't require a lot of time and money, work very well. For example, you can reward your child with a later bedtime, a special dessert, or an extra story at the end of the day.

Trinkets also make useful rewards, and you can give them more immediately than activities or privileges. With your child, buy a variety of trinkets (fancy pencils, barrettes, gum, stickers) and put them in a treasure box. When your child behaves, he or she can pick something from the treasure box. Choose objects your child doesn't normally get. A child who gets baseball cards only in return for certain behaviors, for example, may be more motivated by the special treat. If your child raids the treasure box without permission, lock it up or keep it in a closet or car trunk.

The basic principle underlying concrete rewards for positive behavior can be summed up as Grandma's Law: "When you eat your turnips, then you can have some cake." In other words, if your child does something that is difficult or unpleasant, there is something in it for him or her. "When you've finished your homework, then you may go outside and play." "When you've taken a bath, then I'll read you a story." "When the dishes are cleaned up, then we'll play a game together."

Notice how these examples are phrased. Stating expectations and outcomes in *positive* terms is more motivating than giving negative directions, such as "If you *don't* take out the trash, then you *won't* be able to watch television." Only if a "when-then" phrase is not effective do you turn to a "don't-won't" phrase.

Rewards vs. Bribes

One final note about concrete rewards: They are *not* bribes. A bribe is something given in exchange for an illegal or immoral act, such as paying a public official to extend special favors to a company. Bribes also are usually given *before* the desired act. You give concrete rewards for positive behaviors, *only* after the appropriate effort or completion of a task.

Contrary to what some people think, concrete rewards aren't "bad." They won't make a child expect a cookie every time he or she does something appropriate. In the first place, you won't offer prizes or privileges for every positive thing your child does. Second, if you pair concrete rewards with positive words and touches, the social feedback alone becomes sufficient over time. With maturity and practice, many behaviors your child initially resisted become second nature and you'll no longer need to offer external feedback. For example, you may reward your 10-year-old for taking a bath, but you probably won't have to reward your 14-year-old.

We all respond to positive concrete feedback, and we need it to some extent. That's why businesses offer bonuses and other incentives. Though most of us learn to direct and encourage ourselves, few of us become totally inwardly motivated with no need for positive feedback from others.

Negative Feedback

No matter how strongly and frequently we recognize appropriate behaviors, hard-to-handle children will still be disruptive and disobedient. That's why we often need to combine negative feedback

with positive feedback. The trick, however, is making sure that the balance falls more on the positive side than on the negative. If we use only negative feedback, our children may know what *not* to do, but may not be sure what to do instead.

Before giving negative feedback, consider two important facts:

1. Difficult behaviors have causes. There are reasons children act up (see chapter 2). Before we respond, then, we need to consider why our children may be acting in this way. Whining children may be at their wits' end with fatigue. Angry children might have been yelled at by their teacher several times that day. Defiant children may be hearing too much criticism. Often children aren't aware of the causes, so it's up to us to recognize them.

2. Difficult behaviors indicate a problem exists. When children misbehave, something isn't going right for them. When a child has a problem, we need to listen. We need to acknowledge our child's feelings before giving any direct negative feedback: "I know you're upset that I won't buy a toy." Active listening, then, is the *first* response. But then return *quickly* to the problem at hand. It's like saying, "I understand you're angry that you have to set the table and that's okay. But I need you to help, so I can't listen anymore to your problem right now. If you want to, we can talk about your feelings after dinner, but right now, I need some action from you." Don't be thrown off course by your child's irritation, but *do* show your child the courtesy and respect of recognizing and accepting it.

Planned Ignoring

The mildest form of negative feedback appears to be no feedback at all. It's called planned ignoring. We can ignore our child's behavior when it's annoying—whining or mild arguing—but not disruptive or destructive. For example, after we've done our best to make a tired child comfortable, we can ignore the whining since we can't make the fatigue go away.

Sometimes children act up to seek attention or gain control; they've learned that acting up gets a more immediate reaction than acting nice. When we recognize this happening, we need to intensify our reaction to good behaviors and ignore annoying ones.

Ignoring a child who's trying valiantly to get our attention is hard. We usually want to *do* something and we may struggle to ride out the storm. To help, try these ideas:

Assess the situation. Before beginning any behavior change program, count how often the problem action occurs over a number of days. If you don't know the frequency, you won't know how successful your efforts to change are.

Talk to your child ahead of time. When you are both calm, tell your child which behavior you plan to ignore. The clearer you are about the behavior you'd like the child to work on, the better results you'll obtain. Say something like, "You know, it bothers me when you whine instead of asking for what you want. So when you whine, I'm not going to answer you at all." This tells children what you want them to stop doing: whining. It also tells children what they can do instead: ask for what they want. A good rule to remember is that *whenever you tell children to stop a behavior, tell them how to act instead.*

Do not interact with your child. Completely ignore your child while the annoying actions continue. You may even physically turn away, but do so quietly rather than abruptly or dramatically. Don't sigh, roll your eyes, or do anything that calls attention to your child's irritating behavior. You can give a *nonverbal* signal that you hear but you won't respond until the behavior ceases. Without looking at your child, hold up your hand or finger, but don't respond further. Whatever you do, don't argue—that only keeps the behavior going.

Consider removing yourself. Sometimes you may just need to leave. It's difficult to stay in the presence of a whining child without responding. Even briefly arguing or glaring at a child may be perceived as a reward, especially if your child needs more attention

from you. In these cases, we parents have to follow the advice we give our children when someone is annoying them: "Just walk away." It's hard to follow that advice. We may have to go to our room, shut the door, and lock it to remove ourselves completely. Don't laugh, but earplugs may help.

When Behaviors Get Worse

When you begin to ignore a problem behavior, it usually gets worse before it gets better. When you expect this and ride it out, the annoying behavior typically stops over time. Enlisting other family members in your efforts will help.

When children stop an annoying behavior, quit ignoring and start giving positive feedback a few seconds after they calm down. If you ignore children after they've stopped, they may become discouraged. Continued ignoring may feel like the silent treatment, or rejection.

Here's how using planned ignoring and positive feedback looks:

JASON: Mom, can we go to the store to get some baseball cards?

MOTHER: I'm afraid not, honey. I've worked hard this morning and need to rest now.

JASON: Ahhh, please. I *really* need them *now* because Jimmy's coming over.

MOTHER: I know you're irritated and upset that I won't take you to the store now, and I'm sorry about that.

JASON: Oh, please, please. I've *got* to go, and I've got to go *now!*

MOTHER: [*Firmly.*] I know you're mad, but we can't do it now. I'm not going to talk to you anymore about it.

JASON: [*He continues to whine.*]

MOTHER: [*She raises a finger, but ignores Jason, not looking at or speaking to him.*]

JASON: [*He eventually settles down.*]

MOTHER: [*She waits a few seconds.*] Thank you for calming down. [*She smiles and gives Jason positive eye contact.*] I'll take you and Jimmy to the card store later this afternoon when he comes over.

The Broken Record

Phonograph records sometimes develop scratches that cause the needle to stick in a groove. The same passage repeats itself over and over. If you feel you can't ignore or walk away from your child's arguments, try acting like a broken record. Here's how this would look between Jason and his mother:

JASON: Oh, please, please. I've *got* to go, and I've got to go *now*!
MOTHER: [*Firmly.*] I know you're mad, but we can't do it now. [*She avoids eye contact with Jason.*]
JASON: You *never* do anything for me!
MOTHER: I know you're mad, but we can't go now. [*She continues to be firm, but calm.*]
JASON: But *why*? You can rest later.
MOTHER: I know you're mad, but we can't go now.

With this technique, don't respond to new comments or questions. Just repeat your original statement, over and over. If you argue, you and your child will climb an emotional ladder that can become difficult to manage. If both of you try to match each other's level of intensity (climbing the ladder rung by rung), the situation can deteriorate into a shouting match. If you stay at the bottom of the ladder, children will probably climb the ladder for a while by attempting to argue. But if you don't go along with them, they usually come down without reaching a fevered pitch. If the only voice children hear in an argument is their own, they'll be less motivated to keep it going.

The Worse-Choice Approach

Another method for handling annoying arguments is by giving children worse choices when they try to negotiate. Suppose your son's weekday bedtime is 9:00 P.M., and he wants to stay up until 11:00 P.M. on weekends. You compromise and say he can go to bed

at 10:00 P.M. But your son doesn't stop there. He keeps begging and begging. When this happens, offer a worse choice. Say, "You can go to bed at 10:00 or 8:30." When we give a worse choice, often our child (grudgingly perhaps) accepts our original compromise.

Let's say your daughter wants to have three friends over, but you say only two can come. She argues. You respond, "Okay, you can have two friends or one friend." Your son wants five dollars to rake the leaves, and you're willing to give him three dollars. He argues. You say, "All right, you can rake the yard for three dollars or one dollar."

Statements of Disapproval

When your child's actions escalate from annoying to significantly disobedient or disruptive, give a clear, strong statement of disapproval about those actions. Psychologist Thomas Gordon calls this kind of statement an "I-message." I-messages provide clear, assertive descriptions of your child's problem behavior, your feelings about it, and a brief reason for your disapproval.

Use statements of disapproval when children act:

- Disobedient
- Disruptive
- Aggressive
- Dangerous
- Destructive

I-messages usually work best if you make eye contact with your child, eliminate distractions, speak briefly and directly, and employ a firm but not overly emotional tone of voice. Your facial expression should be stern but not mean. For example, when a child fails to comply with a direction, say something like, "I'm angry that you haven't picked up your room, because company is coming and I want the house to be straightened up." Your message simply describes

1. your feelings (anger)
2. the problem (your child's failure to pick up his or her bedroom)
3. the reason for the problem (company coming)

Don't call names. Don't call your child irresponsible. Don't put the child down personally. Focus on the behavior.

After you've given an I-message, stop talking for a few seconds. Lecturing or repeating yourself only raises the emotional temperature. Your brief silence also serves another purpose. Sometimes, even with hard-to-handle kids, a clear, direct statement of disapproval from an important adult leads the child to correct the situation. Just don't expect your child to be happy about it. Let your child complain as long as he or she does what you expect. Once your child complies, acknowledge your child's effort. Then monitor the situation to make sure your child continues to follow through.

If your child doesn't act within 10 to 15 seconds, however, state the positive consequences your child will experience for following through and the negative consequences for not doing so.

For example, a disapproving statement may look like this:

FATHER: Chris, company's coming in about 10 minutes. Please pick up the toys in your room and put them on the shelves.

CHRIS: Ahhh, Dad, I'm busy working on this model.

FATHER: [*He actively listens.*] I know it irritates you to have to stop what you're doing, and I'm sorry about that. [*He pauses.*] But I need you to do this right now. [*He walks away for 15 to 20 seconds. He returns and Chris is still working on the model.*]

FATHER: [*He approaches Chris, looks at him sternly, and talks more firmly.*] It makes me angry that you haven't begun what I've asked you to do. Company will be here soon, and I want your room straightened up. [*He pauses for 5 to 10 seconds.*]

FATHER: [*Chris doesn't respond.*] You can pick up your room now, and I'll really appreciate it, or you can *not* pick it up and you won't be able to work on your model for tonight and tomorrow.

The father does not argue. His words are brief and to the point. He outlines both positive and negative consequences and gives directions no more than twice. Trying to reason further won't get you far—it's not effective in the midst of a problem.

What if your child responds by asking to do the task later? It's polite to consider a request like this. Don't instantly decline; think about it. If you think it's okay to wait, then hold your child to the timeframe offered. Don't accept anything too open-ended, such as "later." If your child is too vague, ask your child to be more specific. If you can't allow any extra time, be sympathetic. Say something like, "I'm really sorry that I can't wait, because there are some other things I'll want you to do later." Then offer positive and negative consequences.

Obviously, some problem behaviors—those related to a child's age or development level—should *not* be reprimanded. Knocking over a drink is a good example. Children ages 5 and younger can't always track where their hands and arms are in relation to objects. So they spill things. Rather than saying, "It makes me mad when the milk gets spilled because then I need to clean it up," be descriptive: "The milk spilled. Please get a cloth."

In matters of health and safety, however, be more direct. If your son is hitting his baby sister, you're not going to say, "It makes me angry when you hit your sister because you could hurt her." You need to say, "Stop it, now!" You might also need to move your son away from his sister quickly.

Natural Consequences

Natural consequences can provide effective feedback. Natural consequences are those that result from the laws of nature. If you don't wear a raincoat on a rainy day, you'll get wet. If you don't eat your dinner, you'll be hungry later. They can also be positive: If you get enough sleep, you'll be well rested and more ready to tackle the day's challenges.

Whenever we can allow natural consequences to occur without any real danger to our child or others, it's best to let the situation run its course. Let's say your 12-year-old son feels it's dorky to

wear a heavy jacket on a cold day. You've told him the weather report, but he still resists dressing warmly. If he doesn't get sick too easily, you might let nature take over rather than struggle. In other words, let him make the choice and live with the consequence of his decision. Later it might occur to him that being cold is not cool.

Take advantage of times when Mother Nature can do the teaching, since you need to choose your battles wisely with your difficult child. There are certain battles you can't win anyway, no matter how much you try. Sure, you can bully your son into wearing a coat, but once out of sight, he can take it off.

It's also important not to take an I-told-you-so attitude if your child's choice leads to an unpleasant outcome. When your 12-year-old complains about the cold, don't say, "I told you you'd be cold without a coat." Instead say, "Yeah, it sure was chilly." Skip the sarcasm.

Logical Consequences

Sometimes natural consequences are impractical or dangerous. Then you need to create logical consequences that have a clear, understandable relationship to the problem behavior. Logical consequences should be reasonable, respectful to everyone involved (including you!), and discussed with your children in advance.

For logical consequences to be effective, you must be willing to live with the choice your child makes. Let's say your son knows when you eat dinner each night, but he doesn't join the family until 20 minutes later. You've waited time after time, and you're irritated. To use a logical consequence, you could say, "From now on, I'll call you once for dinner. If you aren't here in five minutes, we'll start without you. If we're finished when you arrive, you can take care of your own dinner and clean up after yourself."

What if your daughter habitually misses the bus and you need to take her to school? As a logical consequence, charge a fare when you provide the transportation. If she doesn't have money, charge her time—doing extra chores, such as unloading the dishwasher, folding the wash, or mowing the lawn. Charge her with chores that will take her as long as it took you to take her to school and back.

For logical consequences to be effective, children need to see how the consequence is associated with the problem behavior. If you have to explain it more than once, it's not logical—at least to the child. You'll need to come up with another option. Since preschoolers do not understand logic, this technique often works best for children age 8 and up. Involving your children in developing the logical consequences can be particularly effective in getting them to buy in to the idea. It also gives children the opportunity to think about how to be responsible and respectful, and makes it less likely that children will see the logical consequence as an arbitrary penalty imposed on them.

Don't use logical consequences, however, when your child's choice may create significantly undesirable results. For example, if your child is suspended for tardiness, it can have major long-term implications for your child's education. Try to develop consequences that will help meet everyone's goals.

Whenever you use logical consequences, first discuss the consequences with your child and your plan to use them. Pick a time when your child is calm, and talk about the problem in a direct but matter-of-fact way: "You know, when you miss the bus, we end up mad at each other while I drive you to school. This isn't helping either of us, so I want to do something different. Here's what I was thinking: I'll wake you up in the morning and tell you every 10 minutes how much time is left before you have to leave. If you miss the bus, I'll take you to school, but it will cost you. In other words, if you don't take the free bus, you need to pay for the ride. Every time I drive you to school, I'll deduct $2 from your allowance." Most likely, your child won't like the idea. But you can actively listen to your child's concerns and consider reasonable alternatives your child offers. Just don't get drawn into an argument. Walk away if your child persists.

Remember, don't use logical or natural consequences unless you're committed to allowing your child to deal with the consequences. If you try to "fix" the situation for your child even some of the time, or if the consequences result in stress that *you* can't deal with, this technique will not be effective.

Positive Practice

Sometimes kids develop unpleasant behaviors that become routine or automatic—letting the door slam, leaving the milk out, forgetting table manners, dropping wet towels on the bathroom floor. When you notice these kinds of things, try positive practice, a special type of logical consequences. The next time your child acts up, have your child practice the behavior you'd like by repeating it five times. If you have to ask a second time, the child needs to repeat the positive behavior 10 times.

Let's say your daughter always drops her bookbag on the kitchen floor after school, and nothing you've tried seems to work. Rather than nagging or picking up the bookbag and carrying it to her bedroom, use positive practice. Have your daughter do what she needs to do: pick up the bookbag, go outside, come in the door, go through the kitchen, and bring the book bag to her bedroom. Then have her repeat the process again: five times the first time you ask, 10 times the second.

Intensive practice helps children learn how to act without you having to remind them in the future. If your child refuses to carry out the practice, you can give a more serious consequence. "You may close the door quietly five times or go to bed early tonight."

Fines

Another method of responding to problem behavior is to require that your child pay for it. This involves fines, which can be paid in money, objects, time, or privileges. Although similar to logical consequences, fines may seem more artificial and not so easily linked in the child's mind to the problem behavior.

For this technique to be effective, specifically define which behaviors will result in a fine and what the cost will be. You can even make the fines apply to everyone in the family. For example, you might place a jar on the refrigerator and every time anyone loses his or her temper inappropriately, the person pays a fine based on his or her income level. A child may have to pay a nickel

or a dime, and a parent might have to pay a dollar or more. Fines should be paid as quickly as possible so that the person paying the fine gets immediate feedback.

If your child refuses to pay the fine, keep a running tab. Consider deducting fines from allowances. Or you might think of a different kind of fine, such as cutting the time your child is allowed to ride bike that day.

Guidelines for Removing Objects or Privileges

- Make sure the privilege or object is important to the child, but the loss shouldn't be cruel.
- Revoke a privilege for short time periods, such as a day or two. Negative consequences that go on too long lose their effectiveness.
- The level of punishment needs to fit the level of the problem. For example, don't remove your daughter's soccer privileges for four weeks just because she refused to clean her room.
- Don't take away a privilege a child has already earned. If you reward your son with a movie for doing extra chores, don't take the movie away if he hits his brother. Choose something else to remove.
- Grounding—removing all privileges—may be difficult to keep up. Instead, remove specific privileges, such as the use of the telephone, evening snacks, watching television, or having friends over.
- If your child already has one privilege removed and acts up in another way, remove a different privilege rather than adding to the length of the original privilege removal.

Some children don't respond to fines because they aren't heavily invested in money or particular objects or activities. For these children, a fine could involve doing something unpleasant, such as cleaning the bathroom, pulling weeds, or raking leaves. Specify how long the activity needs to take place, making the time equal to the severity of the misbehavior (not exceeding two hours per offense). Define how much work needs to be accomplished and then supervise the work. Remain calm but firm when ensuring your child does the task in an acceptable manner. Be consistent in applying fines, and don't dwell on the punishment when it's over.

Overcorrection

Sometimes children need to compensate others for their misbehavior. Overcorrection is a form of restitution where children try to undo the effects of their behavior by making the situation *better* than it was before they disrupted it. It also may involve the child positively practicing a more desirable behavior. The technique works well when children have hurt someone or have misused or damaged property. Overcorrection has three steps:

1. **Make a formal apology.** Often you'll need to accompany your child to face the people who were wronged and announce that your child has something to say. In other circumstances, your child may put the apology in writing, especially if the person offended is very upset. A face-to-face apology may be possible later, after emotions have calmed and restitution has been made.

2. **Discuss restitution.** Include your child in discussions of restitution. For example, if your son got mad at his sister and slammed her fingers in the door, he might overcorrect by doing her chores for a day or reading stories to her. He could also practice a more acceptable form of anger expression, such as telling his sister he's mad at her or hitting his mattress. If your 8-year-old threw food on the floor, she'd need to clean up her mess and also mop the entire kitchen. If your 11-year-old carelessly lost something important that belongs to someone else, he'd need to spend an hour looking for it. If he couldn't find it, he'd need to replace it with an object of greater value.

3. **Make restitution.** Make sure your child follows through and completes the restitution you discussed.

Overcorrection shouldn't consume too much energy or last too long, because the child may lose any sense of feeling apologetic and begin to feel resentful instead. The important thing is for children to know that when they do something hurtful, they not only need to apologize and correct the problem, but they also must *show* they're sorry through their actions.

When Children Balk at Discipline

Hard-to-handle children can become so upset that they refuse to follow through with their part of the punishment. When this happens:

- Give children a choice of either doing what they're told or having a more serious consequence.
- Realize children may feel overwhelmed. They may not know how to start or complete the required task. Break it into manageable segments and have children do one segment at a time.
- Be calm and firm. Just because children get angry doesn't mean we need to get angry.

Time Out

Most parenting experts, as a result of research and experience, view time out as one of the most effective forms of negative feedback for children. Though there is no uniform opinion for the age range of usefulness, most see it as helpful for children up to age 9 or 10. Yet many parents say time out doesn't work. When it isn't effective, this usually means parents don't understand the process or carry it out properly.

Time out literally means a *time out* from any social feedback or rewards. It works best with disruptive behaviors, such as defiance, yelling, hitting, temper tantrums, cursing, and destructiveness. Time out is usually not as effective for annoying behaviors like pouting or skipping a routine activity, such as practicing piano or doing chores.

A major advantage of time out is that it doesn't feed into the negative emotion that's already there. When we yell back at a child who curses and hits, the emotional temperature of the situation rises and no one thinks clearly. We may end up screaming at the problem rather than solving it.

Before using time out, explain the concept to your child. You can tell your 6-year-old something like, "You know I scream at you when you yell at me, and we just end up in a big fight. From now

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on, when you yell, you'll need to sit on the bottom step in the hall for six minutes until you can completely calm down." Be clear about the problem behavior and how you will respond: "When I ask you to do something important, you often refuse and you yell at me. From now on, I'll ask you to do something only twice. If you don't do it and yell at me, you'll have a time out for five minutes. After the time out is over, I'll ask you again. If you refuse and yell, you'll get another five-minute time out."

Parents often have a lot of questions about time out:

Where should the time-out area be located? Most experts agree that a part of the home that's relatively dull and unstimulating works best.[1] The time-out area should be away from normal household traffic so the child receives virtually no attention from anyone. The spare bedroom, living room, foyer, hall, or bottom step of a stairway are all possibilities. Make sure the time-out space is away from things the child could play with and that it doesn't have an interesting view. Avoid the child's bedroom, since children will find a lot to do there.

How long should time out last? Short periods are more effective than long ones. A useful guideline is one minute for every year of age through age 6. Then give a total of no more than 10 to 15 minutes for older children. For serious problems such as aggression, a longer period is justified—up to 30 minutes per infraction. If a time out lasts too long, however, the child may lose the connection between it and the problem behavior. Many children become even more emotional if they must spend a prolonged period in time out.

When should a child go to time out? For physically aggressive and destructive behaviors, time out needs to be immediate. "You hit your brother. That's a time out now." For other disruptive behaviors, give a verbal reprimand first. "I don't like to hear that yelling. Please stop or you'll go to time out." If your child yells again, immediately move toward your child (without charging like

a rhino) and firmly guide your child to the time-out area. Don't fuss, yell, or keeping telling your child to go to time out. Use the two-instructions-only rule, and "Act, don't yak," which is what psychologist Sam Goldstein says. As you move toward your child, you can briefly acknowledge your child's anger but don't discuss it any further.

What if children refuse to go? Some children, especially preschoolers, need to be carried or physically assisted to a time out. If this requires great physical force, however, it may do more harm than good. By age 9 or 10, many children can put up a big fight. If your child can physically overpower you, your child may end up feeling frightened and guilty while you may experience strong anger, embarrassment, and fear. In these cases, fine your child or add two minutes to the time out for every minute your child delays going. Or you could say, "For every minute you delay going to your time out, that's 10 minutes off your TV time."

What should happen during time out? Don't talk to your child. Don't look at your child. Don't respond if your child complains or calls out to you. Hard-to-handle children may cry, complain, and yell during time out. Some won't even sit. That's okay—the purpose of time out is to stop the problem behavior and take away positive social reinforcement. As long as children stay in the time-out area, it's okay.

Before leaving time out, your child must be calm for 20 to 30 seconds. If your daughter is crying at the end of time out, say, "When you're quiet for a bit, you can leave time out." Then walk away. If she continues to cry, return every few minutes and repeat the statement. Once she's calm, time out is over. Calm doesn't mean absolute quiet. Some remnants of sniffling and whimpering are okay.

As your child leaves time out, briefly remind him or her of the reason for it. "Remember, whenever you hit someone, you go to time out." Later, when your child is more settled, you can talk about alternative ways your child could have acted instead of hitting.

Time Out Tip

Use a kitchen timer to keep track of time out. But be clear that your child cannot leave time out immediately when the timer rings. You need to come to the child first.

What if children leave time out before it's over? Often hard-to-handle children refuse to remain in time out. Some even run every time you try to return them there. You can try a number of different things:

- For every minute your child leaves time out, take away five minutes of television time.
- Return your child to time out every time he or she leaves. Do this as firmly and as calmly as possible, and as many times as necessary. Carry your child, if that works, but don't talk with your child.
- Increase time out by two minutes for every minute your child leaves, up to 20 minutes. Say, "You've been out of time out for one minute, so that's now 12 minutes instead of 10." If your child still leaves, one minute later say, "You've been out another minute. Now your time out is 14 minutes."
- Confine your child to a room with a closed door. Hold the door shut as long as the child struggles to get out. Some parents lock the door from the hallway, though others feel uncomfortable doing this.

What if children mess up the time-out area? If children make a mess, they must help straighten it up. If they refuse, give a fine. If children destroy some of their belongings, don't replace them. If they damage someone else's stuff, use the overcorrection method (see page 114).

What if children lose control? At times, hard-to-handle children, especially young ones, lose control during time out. They may become aggressive or destructive, run from you, scream hysterically,

leave the room, and even make themselves physically sick from high emotion.

In these situations, try a therapeutic hold. Sit on the floor and put your child between your legs with the child's back against your torso. Place your legs over your child's legs, and cross your child's arms in front of him or her and hold each hand. Put your chin off center from your child's head in case your child rears back and hits your chin or nose. Maintain this hold until your child begins to settle down. Don't talk. Don't fuss. Don't do anything that could make your child's behavior worse. Most likely your child will struggle to break free. That's why it's important to use a therapeutic hold only if your strength can hold an angry child. It may take a while, but your child will eventually calm down. When your child does, gradually relax your hold until your child is completely settled. One important note: If your child requires a therapeutic hold often or takes a half hour or more to regain control, consult a mental health professional.

Feedback Guidelines for Different Ages

As parents, we need to grow with our children and change the methods of discipline we use as our children grow older. Here are some guidelines for determining which feedback strategies work best for kids at different ages.

Feedback Strategy	Most Effective Age Range
Time Out	3 to 10
Positive Social Feedback	3 to 12
Positive Concrete Feedback	3 to 12
Planned Ignoring	3 to 12
Positive Practice	5 to 10
Fines	5 to 12
Statements of Disapproval	5 to 12
Broken-Record Technique	6 to 12
Worse-Choice Approach	8 to 12
Natural Consequences	8 to 12
Logical Consequences	8 to 12
Overcorrection	8 to 12

The Dangers of Harsh Punishment

Many people argue that hard-to-handle kids simply aren't punished strongly enough—what they need is a swat or a tongue lashing. But physical punishment and intense disapproval aren't the most helpful ways to respond to hard-to-handle children. While strong punishment may reduce problem behaviors in the short run, they have too many negative side effects. Just as with medical side effects, when the negative effects of punishment outweigh potential benefits, the treatment should be discontinued.

Harsh punishment not only damages our relationship with our child, but it also fails to help children develop a conscience or internalize moral values. It emphasizes strong external control rather than the child's responsibility to learn how to manage his or her own behavior. Other reasons why strong punishment is not effective include:

Strong punishment is poor modeling. A parent who frequently yells, verbally demeans, or physically punishes a child shows that these are appropriate ways of handling conflict. Remember: The examples we set for our children are more powerful than what we say. If we tell a child not to hit or yell and then we hit or yell, we're giving a mixed message. Never expect your child to act more maturely than you do.

Strong punishment damages children's self-esteem. Children's feelings about themselves are affected by the way parents and other significant people act toward them. If we direct strong negative actions toward our children, they feel more negative about themselves. If children don't feel good about themselves, they may work hard to feel good about something, such as demanding things they like to do and avoiding those they don't like to do. Or they may try to make themselves feel better by making others feel worse. When children don't value themselves, they fail to make good choices about their lives.

Strong punishment hinders learning. The intense negative emotion caused by spanking and strong verbal punishments can interfere with children learning about consequences. Children may remember the punishment, but not what it was for.

Strong punishment doesn't help in the long run. It's hard to think of any time when harsh punishments are helpful. Yelling, screaming, name-calling, and belittling are never effective in the long run and damage our relationship with our child. And frequent physical punishment is associated with children becoming more aggressive and more disobedient outside the home setting. We all know adults who remember clearly, and with emotion, some of the angry things their parents said or did to them as children. Of course, most of us will lose it at times. When we do, we need to own up to our inappropriate behavior, apologize, and ask the child for forgiveness. We can then apply more appropriate consequences in the future.

What About Spanking?

Spanking has been used for many, many generations. Some people claim that Jewish and Christian scriptures endorse it, citing Proverbs 13:24: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him." Parenting expert Jane Nelsen points out that many scripture scholars believe the rod referred to was the type used by shepherds in herding sheep. A rod was not used to hit sheep, but to prod them, guide them, and pull them back from danger.

Does that mean an occasional swat on the bottom will strongly affect a child's self-esteem and our relationship with our child? Probably not. Yet most professionals don't feel comfortable recommending it. It's like a child playing with matches. Most of the time, no serious harm occurs, but every now and then the house burns down. Why risk it, especially when other effective methods are available?

When to Seek Professional Help

There will be times, even though you put out a lot of effort, when a child will continue to be defiant, disobedient, and manipulative. In these circumstances, seek professional help. Parents don't have to go it alone and shouldn't be expected to. A variety of mental health providers, including psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, counselors, and family therapists, offer tremendous resources. You can find these people through your child's physician, a school guidance counselor, your health insurance provider, an employee assistance program, or a local mental health association. Whether you choose a psychologist, counselor, family therapist, or other mental health practitioner may not matter, since research doesn't show a clear superiority of one over the other.

Research does support the use of strategies like the ones mentioned in this book,* and any effective therapeutic program for hard-to-handle children would include training parents in using such strategies. A program that combines parent training and individual work with the child is usually most beneficial. As children become teenagers, family-based approaches to therapy are particularly useful.

Many families decide to work with a mental health practitioner even if problems aren't serious. Mental health providers can be effective with "normal" problems as well as those that create more difficulty. Certain behaviors, however, signal professional help is needed. Red flags include:

- **Significant changes in behavior.** This is particularly true if you can't figure out why this is happening. If a normally happy child goes through a period of days or weeks of being withdrawn and listless, or very angry and irritable, or anxious and depressed, seek professional help. If the child is responding to an obvious stress, such as the loss of a loved one or an accident, a mental health provider can be helpful when these behaviors linger. For traumatic stress, such as sexual abuse, consult a mental health professional right away.

- **Threat of suicide.** Any time a child talks about committing suicide, get help *immediately*.
- **Uncontrollable behavior.** When a child has prolonged and strongly aggressive or destructive emotional outbursts that are difficult to bring under control, seek professional help.
- **Severe behaviors.** Any time your child gets repeatedly involved in fire setting, lying, aggression, cruelty to people or animals, stealing, or destructiveness, seek professional help. These behaviors need to be taken seriously, and you cannot handle them alone.
- **Strong mood changes.** Most children and adults go through mood changes, even during the course of a day. Usually we can tell what has touched off the mood shift—our son is very happy when his soccer team wins, then angry when we don't allow him to stay up late to watch a movie. Certain patterns, however, are warning signs that should be discussed with a mental health professional.

Four Warning Signs of Strong Mood Changes

If you see any of these four warning signs in your child's mood, get professional help.

1. Mood frequently changes for no apparent reason.
2. Moods are often intense and out of proportion to the situation. For example, a child trashes the room because bedtime is earlier than usual.
3. The moods swing from one extreme to another, such as from elation to intense sadness or withdrawal.
4. Mood changes fall into a pattern. For example, several days of mostly elated behavior is followed by days or weeks of sad, withdrawn actions.

When seeking help with a mental health professional, give the process enough time to yield results. Going once or twice and then giving up because you don't see immediate results is premature.

It takes time to develop the type of relationship necessary for mental health intervention to be effective.

Fortunately, working with a professional can reduce your difficulties. Focusing on what you can do by reading parenting books like this one also helps maintain your child's progress. There is help and hope.

Notes:

1. Dinkmeyer, D. (1997). *The Parents' Handbook: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*. Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service.

2. Dinkmeyer, D. (1997); Dreikurs, R. (1964). *Children: The Challenge*. New York: Hawthorne Books.

3. Green, M., T.B. Brazelton, D.B. Friedman, J.B. Reinhart & I.L. Schwartz. (1983). "The Pediatrician's Role in Discipline," *Pediatrics*, Volume 72, Number 3, 373–74; Patterson, G.R. (1975). *Families*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

4. Jaffe, M.J. (1997). *Understanding Parenting*, second edition, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

5. Hoffman, M.L. (1967). "Power Assertion by the Parent and Its Impact on the Child," in G. Medinnus, editor, *Reading in the Psychology of Parent-Child Relationships*. New York: John Wiley; Kazdin, A.E. (1984). *Behavior Modification in Applied Settings*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey.

6. Nelsen, J., L. Lott & H.S. Glenn. (1993). *Positive Discipline A–Z*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing.

7. Rubenstein, A., K. Zager & G. Gottsegan. (1991). "A Parents' Guide to Psychotherapy with Children and Adolescents." Phoenix, AZ: APA Division of Psychotherapy.

8. Chambless, D.L. et al. (1996). "An Update on Empirically Validated Therapies." *The Clinical Psychologist*, Volume 49, Number 2, 5–18.

CHAPTER 8

Using a Home-Economy Program

Authoritative parents provide both support and structure, and when they provide structure, they blend positive and negative feedback. A home-economy program, which combines positive and negative feedback by making expectations and consequences clear, can be an effective way to give hard-to-handle kids the structure they need.

Some children need extra motivation in order to change their behavior, and when other methods you've tried don't work, a home-economy program can help you provide your child with incentives for positive behavior. The term *home-economy program* refers to any system in which individuals are *paid* for positive actions and *fined* for negative ones. Payment may be made in tokens or points, which are used to purchase rewards (either items or privileges). Home-economy programs are sometimes called token systems, token-economy programs, and point systems.

When parents use rewards and mild punishments in a carefully thought-out manner, children become more willing to do things they don't enjoy but have to do anyway. This not only helps make family life go more smoothly, but also helps children develop the skills they will need throughout their lives. Research shows that home-economy programs, when effectively planned and applied, help increase positive behaviors and decrease negative ones.[1] And when negative behaviors decline, the relationship between parent and child improves.

There are many different ways parents can design a home-economy program. One of the simplest ways to encourage children to comply is to give them a penny every time they follow a direction without arguing. Children may save their pennies or cash them in for privileges—an extra story at bedtime or a trip to the treasure box (see page 101). Another approach, which works best with only one or two problem behaviors, involves giving children 10 coins at the beginning of the day. Children pay a coin every time they engage in the unwanted behavior. At the end of the day, they get to keep their remaining money.

These simple approaches, however, aren't always enough for hard-to-handle children, who generally have more than one or two areas that need work. Many families find that a more comprehensive program, such as the one described in this chapter, can be very effective for dealing with difficult behaviors.

Comprehensive home-economy programs often seem complicated and time-consuming at first, so many parents are reluctant to try them. But you can set up a system that won't overwhelm you

or your child. With patience and practice, the program can become a familiar and natural part of your family routine.

If setting up a home-economy program seems too involved at first, begin planning it one step at a time. It's better to spend one or two weeks developing a plan that will work for you and your family than to take on too much too quickly and give up in frustration. And it's better to start out small by working on only a few behaviors at a time. You can then build on your successes rather than take on more than you can handle. Know yourself and your own limits. Home-economy programs aren't for everyone, but they can be extremely effective in helping kids think about their behavior and the consequences of their actions—especially the positive consequences for appropriate behavior.

Decide on the Behaviors to Address

It's a good idea to involve children in developing a program rather than establishing it by executive order. Begin by sitting down with your child and saying something like: "You know, you and I get angry a lot about different things I'd like you to do or stop doing. Let's figure out ways to get things done so we're not yelling at each other so much. What are the things we argue about a lot?" Encourage your child to name things that create conflict, and write them down.

Guide the discussion to focus on behaviors you want to see more often, not just those you want to see less. Positive behaviors might include doing daily activities, such as taking a bath, brushing teeth, or getting up on time in the morning; completing chores, such as clearing dishes off the table, picking up their toys, or putting away their clothes; and following social norms, such as using good table manners. Negative behaviors involve those that are dangerous, disruptive, or interfere with the needs of others: hitting a brother or sister, yelling at parents when angry, lying, running in the house.

Use the ideas that you brainstormed with your child to select the behaviors you want to address:

- Choose three to six behaviors that you and your child would like to work on. Programs fail when families take on too much too quickly. The bookkeeping becomes too complicated, and the system falls apart under its own weight. So start out modestly.
- Because you want to motivate your child to behave appropriately, emphasize *increasing* positive behaviors rather than simply decreasing the negative ones. A reasonable guideline: Work on two to three times as many positive behaviors as negative ones.

Develop a Tracking System

After you clearly spell out the behaviors your child will work on, set up a tracking system. For children ages 6 and older, use points. List positive and negative behaviors on a chart to help you and your child keep track. For children younger than 6, points may be too abstract; use objects such as stickers, poker chips, pennies, or buttons. (If you use buttons, be sure they're unusual and not like those on the family's clothes. Some children build a stash of buttons by visiting other people's closets.)

Look at Stacy's sample home-economy chart on the next page. Stacy is working on six behaviors. She's trying to increase four positive behaviors every day and decrease two problem behaviors. Stacy earns points for completing the positive tasks listed on the chart, and she loses points for engaging in negative behavior. The behaviors are described simply and directly, and the chart provides a good place to track Stacy's points. Stacy's parents post it on the refrigerator so Stacy can see her progress.

Sample Home-Economy Chart

Name: Stacy Dates: September 6–12

		Points Earned						
What I Need to Do:	**Points**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**	**S**
1. Finish daily homework	+20							
2. Feed and water the cat	+10							
3. Be ready for school by 7:00 A.M.	+10							
4. Be in bed by 10:00 P.M.	+10							
Bonus Points →								
TOTAL EARNED →								

		Points Lost						
What Not to Do:	**Points**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**	**S**
1. Yell at Mom and Dad	-20							
2. Refuse to follow directions at home	-20							
Total Lost →								
TOTAL POINTS GIVEN →								

Determine Point Values

Once you clearly define behaviors and set up a tracking system, you'll need to assign values to the behaviors you've listed. How many points (or coins, or stickers) will each behavior be worth? Here are some general guidelines for determining how to allocate points:

• **Tie the value of the task to the time and effort it takes children to carry it out.** For example, you could give 1 point for every minute a task normally takes, rounding off to the nearest five minutes. A three-minute task would be worth 5 points and an

eight-minute task, 10 points. Some children, especially older ones, enjoy earning large numbers of points. In these cases, inflate the point values: 5 points could become 50 or 500 points.

• **Increase the value for the mental or physical effort the behavior requires.** For an easy task, don't add extra points. For a moderately difficult job, double the points. For a difficult one, triple the value. For example, loading the dishwasher may take just as long as emptying all the wastebaskets and taking out the trash, but taking care of the trash may get more points if it requires more effort—especially if the child has to bag up the garbage and carry it out to a distant Dumpster. Likewise, a tedious task that requires more mental effort may be considered more difficult.

• **Enlist your child's opinion.** Determining the difficulty of a task is a judgment call, but when parents and children talk through the situation together, they often agree. Your children's opinions on difficulty are important. It's better to err on the side of rating a task as more difficult than to underrate it.

• **Set fines for negative behaviors.** Determine how many points you'll take away when your child does one of the negative actions on the list. Make the fine steep enough to get your child's attention, but not so large it will wipe out all your child's points for the day.

• **Work out the fines with your child.** Although the seriousness of an offense can be a matter of opinion, children can usually distinguish between small problems and more serious ones. For example, physical aggression is serious and should cost more than running in the house.

• **Points lost should be on the same scale as points earned.** If children earn points in the hundreds, they also should lose points in the hundreds. Make the scale consistent.

• **Don't "double-dip."** For the first couple of weeks on the program, don't reward a positive behavior *and* fine its negative. For example, don't give points for making the bed and remove points

for failing to do so. See how much your child can accomplish with rewards alone before imposing fines.

If your child makes little progress with rewards alone after several weeks, then you may begin deducting points he or she would have obtained by making the bed. Be sure, however, that the number of behaviors fined is less than the number rewarded. In other words, accentuate the positive.

Look again at Stacy's sample chart on page 129. You'll see that Stacy earns more points (20) for doing her homework than for taking care of her cat (10 points), getting up on time (10 points), and going to bed on time (10 points). Doing homework takes more sustained effort and mental energy for Stacy, so it has a bigger reward.

For negative behaviors, Stacy loses 20 points if she yells at her parents or refuses to follow directions. If she does both the negative behaviors, but also completes all her positive actions, Stacy can still earn a 10-point reward for the day.

Choose Rewards

Once you clearly set up your system for tracking behaviors and assigning points, you can determine what rewards your child can earn. Talk with your child about what activities, objects, or privileges will motivate him or her. Say something like: "I want to give you a chance to get some things you want for doing what you're supposed to. You'll earn points (or stars, stickers, buttons, tokens, or whatever you choose) that you can trade for things you'd like to do or have. We'll have stuff you can earn each day and bigger prizes you can earn every week or so. Let's think of things you'd like."

After you and your child have brainstormed some ideas, select the rewards you'll use. Be sure to include daily pleasures as well as rewards that will take longer for your child to earn. Daily rewards are important, especially in the early stages of the program, because frequent feedback promotes change. Positive consequences your child could enjoy daily might include going to bed a bit later, playing a game with a parent, calling a friend on the

phone, or getting extra dessert. Choose three to five small daily rewards, as well as an equal number of larger rewards your child can save points for: a trip to the amusement park, having a friend over for the weekend, or a day off from regular chores.

For children who appreciate money, use it. Each point, button, or token could have a cash value. In the beginning, pay your child daily. As the program develops and your child consistently earns a daily reward, reduce the frequency of payments—first go to every other day and then work toward once a week. This could be the way your child earns a weekly allowance. Some parents don't feel comfortable requiring their children to earn all their spending money, and it's okay to give a small amount freely. But require children to earn anything above that, and make sure the "free money" isn't sufficient to meet the child's wishes for the week.

Stacy and her mom came up with a list of 10 rewards Stacy can choose from when she earns points. About half are small rewards (for example, eating in the den, watching TV, playing video games), and others are larger (for example, having a friend sleep over, renting a video, or $10 in cash).

		Points Spent						
Nice Things I Can Earn:	**Points**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**	**S**
1. Eating in the den	5							
2. Ice cream sandwich	5							
3. An hour of video games	10							
4. Staying up until 10:30	10							
5. An hour of TV	10							
6. An hour of riding bike	10							
7. Renting a video (limit 2/week)	30							
8. Friend sleeps over (limit 1/week)	30							
9. $10 (limit 2/month)	100							
10. Playing miniature golf	100							
POINTS SAVED →								

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Determine the Price of Rewards

While setting the point values for positive and negative behaviors is pretty straightforward, determining the price of rewards can be more challenging. Don't worry about getting it perfect from the start; you can make adjustments as you go along.

One goal of a home-economy program is to make sure children experience some rewards daily to help reinforce their positive behavior. Be sure to offer a few low-cost rewards so children can experience success as long as they earn even a few points. Set a reasonable guideline, such as requiring children to spend at least half the points earned each day. They can "bank" the rest to save for more expensive long-term rewards.

To determine how much each reward is worth, follow these simple steps:

1. **Estimate the total number of points your child could receive in a day.** For example, Stacy can earn a total of 50 points each day if she meets all of her expectations.
2. **Next, divide the total number of points by the total number of rewards your child can earn.** For example, Stacy can earn 50 points a day to be used toward 10 different rewards, so the minimum number of points she needs for a reward is 5.
3. **Set the costs for daily rewards.** Because you want your child to be able to earn some of these rewards every day, keep these costs low. Offer some rewards at the minimum number of points you just determined in step 2. If some daily rewards are a little more motivating than others, you might want to make them cost a little bit more, but make sure your child can still earn them daily. For example, Stacy thinks playing video games (10 points) is more exciting than eating in the den (5 points).
4. **Set the costs for long-term rewards.** Think about how often you'd be willing for your child to earn each larger reward on the list, such as a meal at a favorite restaurant, an

overnight with a friend, or a family outing. Then multiply the minimum number of points (from step 2) by the number of days you'd like your child to save for that specific long-term reward. For example, Stacy and her parents agreed she has to save for about six days to rent a video (5 points/day x 6 days = 30 points), and she'll have to save for about 20 days to get a miniature golf outing (5 points/day x 20 days = 100 points). You may want to set limits on how often your child can earn each long-term reward. For example, no matter how many points Stacy earns, she can collect $10 only twice a month.

Again, don't be too concerned about getting all prices right the first time. Make adjustments in consultation with your child. While the prices you set for rewards are somewhat arbitrary, you need to set them low enough, particularly in the beginning, so children can earn something every day for the efforts they do make. If your child is earning little or nothing after a few days, lower the price of rewards to make things easier. Because you want your child to feel encouraged from the start so he or she is motivated to change, you may prefer to undercharge rather than overcharge for rewards. As your child begins to succeed regularly, you can gradually increase the cost of items and privileges.

Work the System

Once you've determined the behaviors you want increased or decreased, set up your tracking system, and determined all the point values, write everything out neatly on your home-economy chart and post it in a prominent place where you can use it regularly. (There's a blank chart like Stacy's on pages 137–138 that you can enlarge and copy.) Once your chart is complete and you and your child understand what's expected, you can begin to work the system you've devised.

When your child engages in the desirable behavior, award points as soon as possible. Go to your chart immediately and add the points your child has earned next to the behavior under the

appropriate day. If you're giving tokens, award them right away. Carry tokens in your pocket so you can give them out on the spot.

For negative behaviors, subtract points or take away tokens right away, too. The immediacy reinforces your child's behavior more effectively. It also prevents you from forgetting how much your child earned and for which behavior. If your child refuses to give up his or her tokens on the spot, you can take away privileges until the tokens are surrendered, or simply deduct them from the daily tally.

In the beginning, be liberal with points. You can award bonus points for things that aren't on the list. For example, if your son helps his sister with a project, you can add unexpected points, especially if he did it spontaneously or with a positive attitude. But if you do give bonus points, don't give them for every positive behavior. You don't want your child to expect a reward every time he or she does something good, because your ultimate goal is help your child internalize the rules over time.

On the other hand, don't give extra fines. It's all right to award extra points arbitrarily, but not to remove them. Deal with behaviors not on the list through other methods (see chapter 7 for ideas).

For very negative behaviors you list on the chart, such as aggression or destructiveness, you may want to impose a double consequence. Remove points *and* use another discipline method, such as time out or overcorrection. Be clear and upfront about which behaviors have a double-whammy, and don't spring it on your child without advance warning. Try using only one negative consequence for at least 10 days to two weeks before adding a second one, however.

At the end of each day, add and subtract points. Comment positively on points your child earned and be matter-of-fact about those lost. Never use negative numbers, even if your child loses more points than he or she earns. Zero is as low as you should go. Otherwise, your child may feel overwhelmed and discouraged. If your child gets angry over losing points, be sympathetic and listen attentively for a few moments. But do not negotiate. Do not change the rules. And do not argue. Walk away if you need to. (If your child consistently fails to earn enough points for any rewards, however, set up a meeting to adjust the program.)

Finally, reward the points. Let your child cash in on the short-term rewards with at least half of her or his points. Keep track of whatever points your child saves.

Home-Economy Programs Aren't Just for Hard-to-Handle Kids

Because every child has at least a few behaviors that could be increased or decreased, less difficult brothers and sisters also can use the home-economy system (although the number and type of behaviors may be different than the ones for your hard-to-handle child). Having all your children on a home-economy program may help your home life run more smoothly and encourage a focus on positive behavior and rewards for all kids, not just the difficult one.

Although they require more bookkeeping than many of us would like, home-economy programs can help us respond clearly and systematically to our children's hard-to-handle actions. The time you'll spend is a small investment in return for the more positive, harmonious interaction you'll see increase between you and your child.

Notes:

1. Barkley, R. (1997). *Defiant Children*, revised edition. New York: Guilford Press.

Your Home-Economy Chart

Name: _____ Dates: _____

		Points Earned						
What I Need to Do:	**Points**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**	**S**
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
Bonus Points →								
TOTAL EARNED →								

		Points Lost						
What Not to Do:	**Points**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**	**S**
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
Total Lost →								
TOTAL POINTS GIVEN →								

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Your Home-Economy Chart: Rewards

Name: _____ Dates: _____

		Points Spent						
Nice Things I Can Earn:	**Points**	**M**	**T**	**W**	**T**	**F**	**S**	**S**
1.								
2.								
3.								
4.								
5.								
6.								
7.								
8.								
9.								
10.								
11.								
12.								
13.								
14.								
15.								
16.								
17.								
18.								
19.								
20.								
POINTS SAVED →								

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CHAPTER 9

Helping Your Child Keep Up the Good Work

As you become more comfortable with authoritative parenting, you may think, "Do I have to keep giving all this positive and negative feedback forever? When do children learn to guide themselves?"

One of the goals of parenting is to help children develop greater self-control and self-direction, yet many hard-to-handle children need external feedback longer than we wish they did. We can help

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them make the transition by gradually decreasing the consistency, frequency, and intensity of our feedback.

This chapter discusses ways to help our children keep up the good work of acting in positive ways.

Give Periodic Feedback

Once consistent feedback has helped establish a behavior, begin giving feedback less often. If you're using both social and concrete forms of positive feedback, cut back on concrete rewards first, then social rewards. For example, if you've been rewarding your child every time she does her homework promptly, taper off to every other time, then every three or four times, and more randomly after that. You need to do this gradually. And never cut out positive social feedback entirely.

Continue providing negative feedback every time a problem occurs, however. By the time you begin decreasing positive feedback, your child will have less frequent problem behaviors, but still need regular reminders.

Sometimes, even after improvement, a hard-to-handle child's problems surface again, particularly during stressful times. When this happens, return to your original feedback plan. Periodic booster shots of stronger, more frequent reinforcement may be necessary to help your child maintain new behaviors.

Provide Delayed Feedback

When we begin encouraging a behavior, the sooner we can give feedback, the better. But as things improve, you can gradually increase the time between the behavior and your feedback. For example, instead of thanking your daughter right away for taking out the trash, wait until later. At first you might wait for 10 minutes or so, then gradually increase the interval so you thank her at the end of the day.

Enlist the Support of Siblings

The hard-to-handle child's relationship with brothers and sisters can be riddled with conflict. (You'll read more about sibling relationships in chapter 11.) Many siblings, however, have a strong bond beneath the surface conflict. You can encourage siblings to support a difficult child who's making changes. For example, Michael may often be the target of his older sister Jennifer. As Jennifer works on her behavior, you could say, "Jennifer, I really liked the way you shared treats with your brother today." Michael could follow-up, "Yeah, Jen, that was really neat."

Siblings can also give support to positive behaviors parents don't witness. For example, 11-year-old Jordan and his 9-year-old brother Mark eat lunch in the school cafeteria at the same time. One day, Jordan noticed another boy teasing Mark in the lunch line. Mark ignored the teasing and sat at a table away from the teaser. Jordan told Mark, "Hey, good job with that jerk. Walking away was the right thing to do."

While siblings age 6 and older can serve as social reinforcers, some siblings are more helpful than others. A child who is temperamentally easygoing will probably be a better reinforcer. And older siblings may pay more attention to a difficult child's behavior and remember to reinforce it. Even younger children, however, can be encouraged to help. Sometimes all we have to do is to make a comment and then glance at the sibling to encourage her or him to do the same.

Children can be further encouraged to support a difficult sibling's efforts if there's something in it for them. For example, if you use a home-economy program, you could give siblings points every time you hear them reinforce each other's positive behavior.

Advocate for Positive Behavior Outside the Home

Of course we want our children to behave at home, but we also want them to act in similar ways when they're not home. Our goal

is to help our hard-to-handle children routinely act appropriately whatever the circumstances. Most hard-to-handle kids need direct assistance in doing this. You can apply the same type of feedback you use at home to other settings—whether at school, with relatives, or in public places. Use social feedback, concrete rewards, fines, and home-economy programs.

Set a Positive Example

One of the most powerful instructional tools you have is your own example. Remember, you can never expect your child to act more maturely than you do. When you set a good example with your own behavior, your children notice, and they are more likely to adopt and internalize that behavior.

Encourage Self-Monitoring and Self-Control

Directly teaching self-monitoring and self-control methods to your hard-to-handle kid pays many dividends. While even young children can learn some of these skills, they haven't yet developed the capacity for self-examination. Without this capacity, self-control is very difficult. Children are better able to monitor themselves after age 10 or 12, but for some hard-to-handle kids, it takes extra time and practice.

Children learn to recognize their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors when we help them. Most parents know their children so well they can spot signs of trouble. A child's voice may get on edge, she may scowl or crack her knuckles. Some signals are subtle, but we need to pay attention to signals that occur before the child loses it.

Point out these signals to your child in a low-key, nonjudgmental way. Initially, report your observation after the fact rather

than while it's actually occurring. You notice, for example, that your 8-year-old gets a tight jaw and bangs a fist on the table before throwing a tantrum over a video game. Pick a time when your child is calm and not playing video games to say something like, "I've noticed you get a real tight jaw and bang the table shortly before you lose your temper over a video game. Have you ever noticed that?"

Most likely your child will look at you blankly and say, "Huh?" Remember, self-awareness is not a child's strong suit. Then say: "Since you end up losing a privilege when your temper gets out of control, I want to help you keep that from happening in the first place. So when I see you get a stiff jaw and bang your fist on the table, I'm going to let you know it's happening. That way, you'll start to notice when you're doing it, and you'll learn to tell how you're feeling. Once you know it's happening, I can teach you something to help you calm down."

Point out a specific behavior either verbally or with a brief signal. For example, you could knock on the table two times when you see your child's jaw tightening. Being emotional or discussing the child's actions right then will probably increase your child's tension rather than enable your child to notice the behavior and think about it. After a few days of doing this, ask your child if he or she notices what's happening before you point it out. Eventually, your child will begin to notice what's going on without your mentioning it.

Teach Self-Relaxation

Learning relaxation also helps children see that they can handle their own behavior rather than always having to depend on others. As children grow older, the idea of being in charge of their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors may have great appeal. Continue to teach and reinforce relaxation skills. (See pages 89–90 for more on relaxation and some techniques to try.)

Encourage Positive Self-Talk

Just as it's important for parents to talk positively to themselves (see pages 44–45), it's also important for children to do so. Our thoughts are powerful influences on how we feel and how we act. We all talk to ourselves constantly through our thoughts. For example, when Miguel is the subject of Zach's ridicule, Miguel typically says to himself, "He can't do that to me. He's such a jerk. I'll get him for that." If Miguel continues to feed himself these negative, angry thoughts, he'll likely retaliate with anger or even aggression. Getting back at Zach may feel good, but it will likely cause trouble for Miguel in the long run.

Five Helpful Self-Talk Messages

Here are five self-talk messages children can use to keep themselves from getting too upset when another child threatens or ridicules them:

1. **"Uh-oh, here's a problem."** Remind children to recognize a stressful circumstance when it begins rather than waiting for it to climax. Children can begin to breathe deeply and slowly and say something to themselves like, "I can handle this. Stay calm. I won't let this person bother me."
2. **"How do I feel?"** Encourage children to think about their thoughts, feelings, and responses. Children can talk to themselves about what they're experiencing. They may begin by trying to identify the problem, naming their feelings, and figuring out how to respond.
3. **"Calm down."** Remind children to handle their feelings by talking calmly to themselves and by taking some action to maintain self-control, such as breathing deeply. Children can say to themselves, "Relax. It's not worth getting wild over this. I'm going to take a deep breath and calm myself down. It's nothing to get uptight about."
4. **"What else can I do?"** Children also can use self-talk to figure out a new plan of action. By thinking about other options, they increase the likelihood of finding a better solution than their gut response.
5. **"How did it turn out?"** Encourage children to reflect on their responses. Did the situation turn out as they wanted it to? If things went well, children can congratulate themselves or give themselves a reward. If things didn't go well, they can think of other strategies they might have used, without unreasonably putting themselves down in the process. Talk through incidents with your children to help them come up with new ideas.

You can prepare children for monitoring themselves in difficult situations. Help children practice handling sticky situations such as walking away from a fight. Suggest specific strategies they can use to walk away, such as giving a firm statement: "I'm not going to fight with you over this." This can be effective when children maintain good eye contact while making the statement, stand their ground for a moment, and then walk away. If the other child follows, they can stop, turn around, repeat the statement, maintain eye contact, and walk away again. Many bullies are so surprised by this strategy that they back off more frequently than you'd think.

Suppose a bully doesn't back off. The typical hard-to-handle child's first response is to attack or fight back. But when children learn to identify their feelings, stay calm, and look for other solutions, they have a better chance of avoiding the consequences of a fight. They can choose another course of action, such as looking the bully squarely in the eye and saying firmly, "Stop it!" The child then moves toward the bully, maintains a firm expression and eye contact, and gets ready to block any punches without hitting. This tends to unnerve bullies, and they often withdraw.

The child has then defended himself or herself without running away or being aggressive. Remember to help your child practice various strategies so they become more comfortable. First let your child be the bully while you model how to respond. Then you play the bully.

You can help your child keep up the good work with less external feedback over time. But just as it will take time and practice for you to learn different strategies for handling difficult behavior, so it takes similar effort for children to handle their own actions. Patience and encouragement go a long way in promoting positive change.

Solving Problems as a Family

Parents alone aren't responsible for solving family problems, and involving children in solving problems that arise can help you find the most effective solutions and help your child see positive ways of solving problems. From about age 10, children's thinking

processes mature so they can solve some problems in an adult-like fashion. By this age, children also have a greater store of experience from which to draw.

Everyone has a different style of thinking and dealing with problems. Some people approach problems logically. Some consider personal feelings and issues in making decisions. Some formulate ideas in an intuitive fashion. So before solving problems as a family, recognize that different family members will have different approaches. Not everyone processes information or handles concerns the same way. Accepting and valuing these differences is important, and following a basic problem-solving process helps accommodate these differences. In fact, different points of view help solve problems because groups generate a greater variety of potential solutions than individuals do.

The goal of family problem solving is to find solutions everyone feels good about—a win-win situation. Sometimes a compromise must be reached, which won't feel great to everyone, but all participants should get something out of the process.

Ground Rules for Family Problem Solving

Watch your timing. It's impossible to think through a problem when emotions are high, so wait until everyone has calmed down. Some families schedule regular meetings to discuss issues and problems. This way, family members know they'll have an opportunity to bring up problems and work through them. It helps families avoid the crisis mentality of trying to solve problems in the heat of the moment.

Regardless of whether you have regular family meetings, don't schedule problem-solving sessions when people are too busy or too tired. Tackling a problem at the end of a hectic day is doomed to failure. Try to set meetings on weekend afternoons or other downtimes. And when you do meet, make it brief. Deal with a problem one piece at a time in 15-minute sessions. Prolonged

discussions can lead to frustration and anger—and no one may want to undertake the process again.

Find a place to meet. If a meeting involves parents and only one child, hold it in private, away from siblings. Turn off the telephone. Don't allow interruptions, except for true emergencies.

Talk about successes first. Start by pointing out positive things that have been going on with your child and your family. Recognizing efforts in dealing with other family issues encourages everyone to participate in solving a specific difficulty.

Follow the six steps to solving a problem. The rest of this chapter describes six steps to effective problem solving. Copy the six steps and refer to them when you work on problems.

Six Steps to Solving a Problem

1. **Identify the problem.** Talk about each person's needs.
2. **Generate possible solutions.** Brainstorm ideas. Treat each idea with respect, and don't rule anything out yet.
3. **Evaluate solutions.** Evaluate each solution and discuss the pros and cons. Eliminate any solutions anyone is clearly opposed to.
4. **Choose a solution.** Consider all the remaining solutions in greater detail. Choose one that is acceptable to everyone involved.
5. **Implement the solution.** Decide who will begin to implement what and when.
6. **Reevaluate the solution.** Find out how the solution works for each person. Discuss what needs to be changed. Make appropriate adjustments.

Step 1: Identify the Problem. Before exploring a problem, be clear about what it is. Define the problem as something that gets in the way of people's values or needs. For example, suppose your son Jamal enjoys putting together model cars but becomes very angry and frustrated when the parts don't fit together easily. He yells or throws things. Maybe you've tried a fine for outbursts, but

the problem continues. You've talked with him many times and said, "You need to stop working on those models so long because you get so mad." If you make your son stop altogether, you get what you want, and you win. However, your son loses because he doesn't get what he wants, which is working on a model.

Define the problem according to needs and wishes. Your son enjoys working on the model. You want peace and quiet. So you can say something like, "I know you enjoy your models, and I'm glad you have that interest. I also know that at the end of the day, I'd like some quiet. That's hard if you lose your temper. Let's figure out a way for you to enjoy your hobby while I get some quiet without either one of us feeling upset or taken advantage of." By saying this, you state your commitment to a win-win solution.

Step 2: Generate Possible Solutions. The second step is to sit down together, paper and pencil in hand, and come up with as many ideas as possible about how to solve the problem. This is called brainstorming. To brainstorm, participants call out ideas while someone writes them down. Don't evaluate the ideas yet—don't make negative comments, or even support any ideas. Give every idea equal respect.

Ideas for Solving the Model-Building Problem

- Jamal works on models only when his parents aren't home.
- Jamal works on models only out of parental earshot.
- Models are banned from the house.
- Dad teaches Jamal relaxation skills to use while building models.
- Parents learn to live with Jamal's yelling.
- Parents help Jamal find less-difficult models.
- Parents get earplugs.

Step 3: Evaluate Solutions. Once you're done brainstorming, discuss the pros and cons of each potential solution. Keep only those that don't create clear winners or losers. Remove all other solutions from the list. Solutions such as "Parents learn to live with

Jamal's yelling" or "Models are banned from the house" aren't viable, because one party clearly loses and the other wins. If anyone involved is adamantly opposed to a solution, take it off the list. Many solutions get eliminated through this process, and you might end up with only a couple that might work. Occasionally—but not as often as you might think—all possibilities are eliminated. If this happens, take a 24-hour break. When you return, one or two of the solutions may look more acceptable, or you may have new ideas.

Step 4: Choose a Solution. Consider the most viable proposals. Try to choose one that works, at least most of the time, for everyone. If you can't reach an agreement, take a break from the problem and return to it a day or two later. Sleeping on it often helps family members formulate different perspectives; they'll usually continue working on the situation, at least in the back of their minds. Sometimes a good solution involves combining solutions. For example, Jamal can use relaxation techniques when he feels uptight and agree to work on models in the basement.

Step 5: Implement the Solution. Decide when and how the solution will be implemented. For example, the family may decide that in one week, Dad will begin teaching relaxation skills, and Jamal will move his model-building downstairs. Creating a contract that everyone signs in each other's presence may further increase everyone's commitment to making the solution work.

Step 6: Reevaluate the Solution. After the solution has been carried out for a specific time period (usually a week or two), get together to discuss how the solution is working. Often this can be done informally. You might say, "How is the model-building situation working out for you?" Also offer your own perspective: "We've been pleased to have more quiet at home during the evenings." If there are problems with the solution, sit together again and fine-tune the process so it's satisfying for everyone.

Families often do a good job of working on problems through step 4, but fall short at actually implementing and reevaluating the solution. Closely monitor these last two steps.

Trying to solve problems with this process may seem time-consuming at first. But remember: You're already spending a lot of time and energy dealing with difficulties as they occur. Using this method systematically can save you time over the long run.

This process may also seem complicated initially. Adults typically solve problems by going through these six steps, but we do so more quickly and informally. For example, think about the last time you figured out how to afford a car repair. You probably generated a number of different solutions in your mind and then evaluated them quickly, reviewing the pros and cons of each before making a decision. You followed through on your decision, and finally evaluated your choice to see if it met your needs. The process doesn't have to take much time, especially if problems aren't too complex.

When you use this approach regularly, you help your hard-to-handle kid practice positive problem-solving strategies, and this helps your child maintain new behaviors. Perseverance pays off, and everyone comes away with workable solutions and good feelings about each other.

CHAPTER 10

Dealing with Specific Hard-to-Handle Situations

With so many parenting techniques to choose from, how do you decide which approach works best? Few, if any, techniques work for every child—or for every parent—and in every situation, so it's important to experiment. The bottom line is that you just need to try various approaches and determine what helps and what doesn't.

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This chapter offers general guidelines for choosing appropriate feedback, as well as suggestions for determining what techniques work best for specific hard-to-handle behaviors.

Five Steps to Choosing Appropriate Feedback for Your Hard-to-Handle Kid

1. **Try to determine what might be causing the problem behavior.** A child who lies may fear strong consequences for doing something inappropriate. A child who steals may not be receiving enough positive emotional support and may settle for material things instead. If you know *why* a child does something, you're more likely to discover an appropriate way of responding.
2. **Choose forms of feedback you can follow consistently.** Your comfort with a technique will depend on your personality, your experiences, and your values about how to raise children. It's important to feel comfortable with the approaches you try, since you probably won't use them effectively if you don't.
3. **Give a technique time to work.** Too often, we respond to our hard-to-handle child with an appropriate feedback technique but give up if we don't see immediate progress. Use an approach for at least two weeks before evaluating whether or not it's helping.
4. **Choose techniques that fit your child's personality and developmental level.** Time out, for example, is appropriate for young children, but loses effectiveness as children grow older. Teaching self-control is less useful at age 6 or 7 than at 10 or 12. Logical consequences make more sense to an older child than to a preschooler. (See the chart on page 119.)
5. **Consider the circumstances surrounding the problem behavior.** If you're visiting friends, for example, you might not find an appropriate space for a time out. Removing a privilege when you get home may be more effective, especially when you tell your child then and there what you plan to do.

Morning Madness

Mornings aren't easy for many people, including adults. If your child isn't a morning person—someone who wakes up easily and gets moving quickly—you may face a cranky child.

In dealing with morning hassles, try the following:

• **Be firm about bedtime.** Make sure your child gets to bed at a reasonable hour. Sometimes with more rest, getting up is easier.

• **Take care of morning needs the night before.** Select clothes to wear. Pack lunches. Have bookbags ready to go at the door.

• **Allow some snooze time.** Consider giving your child a wake-up call 10 minutes before he or she needs to get up. Or teach your child how to use the snooze feature on an alarm clock. By age 11 or 12, children should be able to get themselves up with an alarm.

• **Give slow movers extra time.** Some people just need to sit on the edge of the bed and stare for a while before they get going. Children who are given time to adjust to the idea of being awake may be less irritable.

• **Be clear about expectations.** Specify the steps in the morning routine—getting up, making the bed, getting dressed, eating breakfast, brushing teeth, and so on. You could make these tasks part of a home-economy program (see chapter 8). Usually it's best for children to dress before eating breakfast. Otherwise, they may dawdle and then have to rush while you nag. Don't allow children to do any other activities—including watching TV—until all morning tasks are completed.

• **Use logical consequences.** Older children who continue to have trouble getting up in the morning may need to suffer the logical consequence of being late for school. Do not send an excuse note. Let your child experience the school's consequences for being late.

Bedtime Difficulties

Many hard-to-handle children have trouble settling down at night. Once children are in bed, they pop up wanting a drink, needing to go to the bathroom, having one more thing to say, or trying to

get into your bed during the night. They argue about their bedtime or complain about having an earlier bedtime than their older siblings. Here are some ideas that might help:

• **Create a bedtime routine.** Establish a quiet bedtime routine—taking a bath, having a snack, and reading a story—especially with young children. Calming bedtime activities help children settle down more easily. They can also create a pleasant time for you and your child. Once routines are established, both parents and children often find them satisfying.

• **Encourage calming activities in the evening.** Children usually need a bedtime routine until the teen years, but after age 10, they may want something different. Children can read or even play quietly as long as the activity helps them wind down and doesn't bother anyone else.

Arranging a calming time might be difficult for the hard-to-handle child who prefers to watch TV or play video games until bedtime. But you can set firm and consistent boundaries. Insist that stimulating activities stop 30 minutes to one hour before bedtime. At the appointed time, give one verbal notice. If it isn't followed in 20 seconds, turn off the TV (don't wait for the child to do so) and direct your child, physically if necessary, to the bedroom or bathroom. If the direction still isn't followed, use a line or logical consequences.

• **Require children to be in their rooms.** You may want your children to get to sleep by a certain time, especially if they're irritable and hard to get up in the morning. However, there isn't always a connection between a late bedtime and morning irritability. Some children have a hard time getting up whether they sleep a little or a lot. You can't *make* children go to sleep, but you can require them to be in their rooms and turn to a quiet activity like reading if they have difficulty falling asleep.

• **Don't let children sleep with you.** Most children like to sleep with their parents sometimes. It's tempting to allow this, especially if your child is upset from a bad dream or feels lonely and scared.

It's important not to allow children to sleep with you on a regular basis, however. Such routines are hard to break if they continue into later childhood. For frequent bed invaders, walk them back to their room, offer comfort if necessary, kiss them goodnight, and leave.

If your child continues to come into your room, and walking him back a few times doesn't work, hold his door shut until he finally settles down. Your child may scream or cry, but if you can ride it out, children often decide they prefer their room with the door open rather than shut. Some parents lock their own bedroom doors to keep children from coming in. Experiment with this as long as you trust your child will go back to bed and not wander around the house, doing things that might be dangerous or disruptive.

• **Use a reward system.** When your child doesn't interrupt you in the night, have a small treasure box reward waiting the next morning. Going to bed and staying in bed can be behaviors worked into a home-economy program.

• **Give children some sense of control.** When children are upset that older siblings get to stay up later than they do, use your active listening skills. Assure them that even though they have to be in their bedroom earlier, they don't have to go to sleep. If children know they can fall asleep when they choose, they may not fight as much about getting into bed. They often end up going to sleep sooner, too.

• **Seek professional help.** If your child anxiously interrupts your sleep frequently because of nightmares or other fears, see a mental health professional.

Mealtime Struggles

For some families, mealtimes feel like battlegrounds. Typical problems include poor table manners, leaving and coming back to the table, complaining about the food, and refusing to eat. Yet, mealtimes

need to be as pleasant as possible to nourish both bodies and family relationships.

• **Be creative about table manners.** Discussing table manners while you're eating can ignite tempers. Instead, focus on setting a positive example for your children. While eating, offer compliments when your children show good manners. Outrageous behaviors, such as showing the contents of their mouth to a sibling, can be handled by having the offender leave the table for five minutes. You also can teach manners by having the family choose one night a week to practice good table manners at dinner. Do it in a lighthearted fashion, focusing on only one or two manners at a time, such as saying "Please" and "Thank you."

• **Be firm about staying at the table.** When children leave and return to the table, remind them that mealtime will be over shortly. Explain that the next time they get up unexcused, you'll remove their plate, even if they haven't finished. Then follow through—either throw the food out or put it away. They can wait for the next meal or later warm up the plate you've put away and clean up their own dishes.

• **Be matter-of-fact about complaints.** If children say they aren't hungry, say they don't have to eat and remove their plate. If they don't like what you've prepared, acknowledge their feelings and say they don't have to like it but you don't need to hear their complaining. If the complaints continue, remove the food. Children who strongly dislike what's served can fix their own dinner or wait until the next meal. The less emotional you can be in your response, the better.

• **Respect your child's biological clock to a reasonable extent.** If your child isn't hungry, let him or her eat later, as long as it's what your family ate or something else nutritious. Children who choose this option should eat by themselves and clean up their own dishes, although you can still require them to sit with the family during meals. Mealtime is as much about talking and sharing as a family as it is about eating, and this time together is important.

• **Encourage children to help with meals.** Complaints often evaporate when children help select a menu, prepare the food, or choose a restaurant. You could set up a rotating system so everyone in the family has an opportunity for some say. Compile a list of favorite restaurants that takes variety and price range into account. Ask children about their food preferences, and let them make some choices about groceries and menus. Teaching children to prepare a new recipe can be effective in getting them to try the results.

• **Don't force children to eat.** Unless your child isn't growing properly or is poorly nourished, diet usually balances itself out. If you have particular concerns, ask your child's doctor. A daily vitamin supplement may be helpful, if your physician agrees.

Messes and Household Disasters

Children—and some adults—are notorious for not cleaning up after themselves. You can make putting toys away and hanging up clothes part of your home-economy program. Or reinforce these behaviors through positive practice or positive social feedback. You can also:

• **Create a Seven-Day Box.** For children who leave their belongings lying around, set a time each day when toys must be put away. Any toys left out after that time will be put in the Seven-Day Box and tucked away. Make the toys available one week later.

• **Pack up extra toys.** Sometimes children have too many possessions to keep track of. If this seems to be the case at your house, help your children go through their toys. You can often eliminate as many as half of the toys by packing them in boxes and putting them in storage. If children want to play with a toy that's been put away, they must trade a toy that is already out for the one they want. If children refuse to help with this cleaning-out process, tell them you'll do it alone when they aren't there. They probably won't like the idea of you making all the decisions.

Public Outbursts

Hard-to-handle children frequently act up in public, and parents don't always know how to deal with these situations effectively. Screaming children who demand something at the store often know they'll get what they want because their parents want them to be quiet, and so this behavior is reinforced. But this doesn't have to happen. You can:

• **Ask yourself if the outing is necessary.** Taking a preschooler to the grocery store before dinner is a problem waiting to happen. Look for alternatives. Consider how much time your outing will take and how this could affect your child. Two hours of shopping for clothes constitutes cruel and unusual punishment for most kids. Having to sit quietly for an hour or more in a nice restaurant also invites trouble. Be fair to yourself, your child, and other customers by taking these matters into account. And if you find yourself in these circumstances, provide interesting things for your child to do.

• **Be clear about rules and expectations.** When your child goes out with you, review the rules. Before entering a store, restaurant, or other public building, establish eye contact with your child and clearly state which behaviors you expect and what will happen as a result: "When we go into the store, I want you to stay next to me rather than running ahead. If you stay next to me, we'll have a good time, and we can have a treat afterward. If you don't stay next to me, you'll have a time out in the car." Make sure your child understands your directions by having him or her repeat them back to you.

• **Give your child feedback.** As you enter a public place, immediately comment positively on your child's behavior: "Thank you for staying with me. I really like that." Continue to frequently reinforce your child's effort.

• **Use time out if necessary.** As soon as your child violates your guidelines, take the child firmly by the hand and go to the car for

a five-minute time out. (If a trip to the car for a time out isn't practical, try a secluded corner of a store.) Say, "You ran off. That's time out." Of course your child may flail and wail on the way out. But if you remain firm and persistent, your child will learn that you'll do what you say.

When you use a car for time out, be sure to follow safety precautions. If weather permits, it's best if you stand right outside the car. If it's the weather is too hot or too cold, you'll need to sit in the car with your child and keep the air-conditioner or heater running. If you need to sit in the car, try earplugs. Whatever you do, don't interact with your child during time out. If your child is still upset at the end of the time, say, "When you're quiet, we can go back in and try again." Be prepared to leave again if necessary. If you need to put your child in time out more than twice, end the outing and use a time out when you get home. This method works for any behaviors that cause problems in public places, such as begging for toys or throwing tantrums.

• **Use other strategies if your child is too old for time out.** For older kids, time out is clearly ineffective and may set up a physical confrontation. For example, 12-year-old Matt just had to have the latest basketball shoes, even though his father had told him that they might be too expensive. At the store, Matt headed straight for the $149.95 shoes and loudly begged his father to buy them. Matt's father kept his voice down, saying the shoes cost too much, but Matt talked louder, scowled, and even knocked other shoes he was offered on the floor. Matt's father walked away and refused to buy anything that day, telling Matt he'd deal with the problem once they got home.

The best approach with older children, too, is to talk with them ahead of time about the consequences for misbehavior in public. Let them know what is unacceptable and how you'll deal with such behavior, especially if it persists. Talk with your child to define logical consequences, fines, or privileges that will be removed.

• **Practice being in public.** Parents often complain that if they give time outs to their children in the car, they'll never get their shopping done. And what do you *do* with a cart full of groceries?

(Wheel it to the front of the store and tell a clerk you'll be back. Or leave the cart and hope it's still there when you return.) For the chronic public offender, have "training trips." Take your child to the store for very short visits. Use a cart, and if your child misbehaves, leave the cart and give your child a time out. Training trips are most effective when you do them every day or two for 15 to 20 minutes. This gives your child time to develop appropriate public behavior. Having a number of training periods close together is more effective than spacing them too far apart. Then you can graduate to the real thing.

Anger and Aggression

Hard-to-handle children often express their displeasure through anger, defiance, or aggression. Sometimes they express anger physically, but they may also show their feelings by rejection, verbal assault, or withholding affection. We can't get rid of anger, so the trick is to help our children learn how to express it without creating undue difficulties for themselves and other people. Remember that angry behavior is often an expression of other feelings, such as hurt, sadness, fearfulness, or discouragement. Try to tune in to the underlying emotion of your child as well as to the anger itself.

Here are some tips for dealing with anger:

• **Look at your own behavior.** Examine the ways you communicate anger to your children and to other adults. If you want your child to use words rather than screaming, kicking, or hitting, then use words yourself and choose the same words you'd like your child to use.

• **Don't pick unnecessary fights with your child.** Sometimes we parents are too loud, give too many directions, and natter on about problems, which can set off a hard-to-handle child. Research suggests that parents of hard-to-handle children give more—and often unnecessary—directions to their kids than parents of other

children. Parents sometimes ask too many questions or criticize unimportant matters, such as a child's clothing, hair, or choice of music. Try to avoid encouraging your child to act up, stop nagging, lecturing, or nosing into unimportant matters. Choose your battles wisely.

• **Discuss acceptable ways to express anger.** Choose a time when you're calm to discuss acceptable ways your child can express anger. Instead of telling children only what *not* to do, be clear on what they *can* do. Teach them to say, "I'm so mad!" instead of blaming or calling names. Through your own example and explicit instruction, teach an acceptable tone of voice, volume, and audience. For example, you might teach children that it's okay to have an angry look on their face and to speak loudly, but not to scream. Or if they do need to scream, they should scream at a wall or into a pillow rather than at a person.

Some children, especially intense, action-oriented kids, find that talking alone won't do the trick. They need to do something physical: hit a pillow or mattress, punch a stuffed animal, or throw a soft toy at a door. Or they can run around outside, shoot baskets, or throw a rubber ball against the house (away from windows) to express their anger or irritation.

• **Remind children what's not acceptable.** Besides teaching children what they *can* do when they're angry, remind them specifically what *not* to do. Hitting; throwing sharp, hard, or heavy objects; name-calling; cursing; and screaming are unacceptable expressions of anger.

• **Talk about consequences.** After children know what's acceptable and what's not, tell them what happens next. If children express anger in acceptable ways, you'll listen and give positive feedback. If anger control is an ongoing problem for your child, use a home-economy program and award points when he or she expresses anger appropriately. Also be clear about what will happen if your child expresses anger inappropriately. Physical aggression is never acceptable, and you need to deal with it directly and

on the spot. Immediately withdraw points or use time out without warning, discussion, or second chances. Consider using two methods of correction, such as taking away points and giving time out to show your child the severe inappropriateness of hitting other people. Of course if you really want to teach that people are not for hitting, don't spank your child.

• **Make restitution.** Aggressive children should make restitution under parental supervision, after they've calmed down. If the child refuses or stops too quickly, start the process over again. If the child is too angry and upset, give time out first and then have the child apologize and do positive practice. (See page 114.)

• **Intervene on intense sibling squabbles.** Very strong feelings often come out in sibling relationships, and physical aggression is more likely to occur there than toward a parent. In addition to using time out, removing privileges, and deducting points, overcorrection may be effective. The offending child should make restitution, apologize, and then practice a positive behavior. Children who become aggressive over sharing a toy could practice exchanging the toy with the sibling five times. (For more on sibling relationships, see chapter 11.)

• **Teach relaxation and self-talk.** These skills are key in moderating anger and aggression. (See pages 143–144.)

Check It Out

Don't Rant and Rave on Wednesdays! The Children's Anger-Control Book, written by Adolph Moser and illustrated by David Melton (New York: Landmark Editions, 1994). With descriptions of inappropriate behavior and straightforward suggestions for alternatives, this book teaches kids how to respond more effectively.

• **Media violence.** Research has shown a clear relationship between children's viewing of violent entertainment and their aggressive

behavior in play and in life. This relationship may be especially strong in young children who are intense and strong willed.

Another problem with media violence is that children see adults using violence to solve problems. This sets a dreadful example and contradicts what we tell children about fighting. Frequent viewing of violence can desensitize children to its effects. When people lose their capacity to be shocked by violence, they're less likely to respond constructively and empathically. For these reasons, it's extremely important that parents of hard-to-handle children carefully monitor their diet of violence.

Monitoring violence isn't the same as eliminating it. For young hard-to-handle children, limit this type of programming to 30 minutes a day. Once children reach the age of 8, they might be able to tolerate an hour or so. But if you see your child incorporating the violent themes seen into play, eliminate the programming entirely until the child is older and capable of exercising more self-control. Know the programs your children watch and the computer and video games they play. If highly aggressive content from these games comes out in play, direct children to games that are adventurous but not aggressive, such as athletics and simulated auto racing.

Also be aware of possible violent content on the Internet. While some sites glamorize graphic violence, sites that provide specific instructions on how to engage in violent activities should be of greater concern. For example, children can learn how to construct bombs and encourage highly disruptive group behavior at school through certain Web sites. Many online services provide parental-control options, and some software also has these features.

These same guidelines apply to play fighting and violent toys. Monitor the time your children spend in these activities. When play fighting turns into real fighting or children become overly involved in playing with toy weapons, you need to step in. Allow play fighting and using violent toys for no more than 30 minutes to an hour at a time, giving breaks in between and encouraging other activities that may be adventurous but not aggressive, such as playing on jungle gyms or riding bicycles.

Lying

Hard-to-handle children often lie. Lying is a willful attempt to deceive another person in order to get positive results or avoid negative ones. Preschool children may not always tell the truth, but often they can't consistently distinguish what really happened from what they thought happened or wanted to happen. It's like having an extraordinarily vivid dream. In many ways, preschool children go through their days this way, failing to distinguish thoughts and fantasies from realities. When a preschool child says she didn't pull the cat's tail, she may mean that she wishes she hadn't.

Older children lie for the same reasons adults do—to avoid consequences for their behavior, because they're ashamed to admit the truth, or to avoid embarrassment or rejection. Young people also may lie to get the attention it brings, or because they are angry at us and want to make us mad, too. Understanding *why* a child is lying is often the key to correcting the problem.

Let's be honest. Some untruthfulness occurs in human relationships—even among adults. Becoming overly uptight about the occasional lie from a child can be hypocritical, but you do need to deal with persistent lying. Here's how:

- **Don't set up a child to lie.** Don't ask a child a question you already know the answer to. If you know your child hasn't cleaned his room, don't ask, "Did you clean your room?" Simply say, "I noticed you didn't clean your room. Please do it now."

- **Don't overreact.** Overreacting to a small lie can lead to more lying because children are afraid of your reaction. Try to be calm and step back from your emotions. You want your children to trust you.

- **Define clear consequences for lying.** If children know the punishment, they'll know they're taking a risk if they lie. Negative consequences may include having privileges taken away for an evening or having points deducted in a home-economy program. Make the consequence strong enough to get children's attention but not so harsh as to be discouraging. Also make sure children understand that the punishment for lying is in addition to any

penalty for an offending behavior. In other words, if your daughter says she cleaned her room but she didn't, she gets two penalties: one for not cleaning her room, and another for lying about it.

• **Reprimand children when you notice a lie.** And watch for any pattern of recurrence. When lying becomes a frequent part of a child's behavior, take action. Let your child know the consequences for lying, and enforce those consequences consistently.

• **Reward the truth.** Tell your children how much you value their owning up to a problem. Acknowledge them when they tell the truth when they would have benefited from lying.

• **Confront suspected lies, even if you don't have clear proof.** Say, "That doesn't sound like the truth to me, although I can't prove it right now. Maybe you're scared that I'll get mad at you or something bad will happen if you tell me the truth. Think about it for a while and then decide if you want to tell me what happened." Sometimes a cooling-off period encourages children to be truthful.

If children don't change their story and you still believe they're not being truthful, say, "Well, I still have my doubts about your story, and you need to know that I'm going to be watching this situation very closely. If I find out you've lied to me, it'll cause a big problem between us, and you'll have consequences for it." A forceful course of action would be to issue negative consequences even for suspected lying, especially if your child is a chronic offender. If you find later that you reacted unfairly, make proper amends.

Maria frequently lied about her grades on tests. She'd claim to get As and Bs, but was really earning Cs and Ds. Her parents decided not to accept her reports of test grades without seeing proof. One afternoon, Maria bounded in the door, announcing she'd made an A on her spelling test. When her parents asked to see the test, Maria said she had forgotten it. Because of her record of lying, she wasn't allowed to watch TV that evening, which she protested mightily. The next day, Maria angrily brought home her test with an A, accompanied by a note from her teacher about how proud she was of Maria. Maria's parents apologized, and they made restitution, allowing her to stay up later that night.

Stealing

Stealing is a difficult behavior to handle—especially when it goes undetected for a long time and becomes self-reinforcing. The longer a behavior goes on, the stronger the habit becomes, and the harder it is to break. Some things to consider in handling stealing:

- **Avoid borrowing things without asking for permission.** Often parents bring items home from work without paying for them, thinking of this as a fringe benefit. But children may recognize it as stealing, which it is. Likewise, it's important not to borrow things from children without their permission. Don't raid your children's piggy bank without discussing it with them. This is simply good manners, and it sets a positive example.

- **Supervise children closely.** Don't let young children wander in stores, and require older children to check in regularly so they don't go off for long periods of time by themselves. For children with a history of stealing, tighten supervision, especially outside the home. Stick with these children like glue in public places. As time goes on, you can allow children a little freedom to see how they handle it. For example, let older children go off alone for 10 minutes. When they return, they need to know you may search them to ensure they haven't stolen anything.

- **Reprimand children when you suspect stealing.** When you know your child has taken something, don't ask. Make a firm and not overly emotional verbal reprimand: "My money is missing, and I believe you took it, since you were in my room by yourself. When I went to my room, the money was gone." If your child denies it, deal with the suspected lying as outlined on page 165.

- **Make a replacement plan for stolen items.** If your child takes something from a store, quickly develop a plan for replacing it. If your child still has the stolen item, he or she must return it to the store manager with apologies. Accompany your child, but provide only emotional support. Let your child do the talking. If the item has been used up, repay the store and work out a plan for your

child to pay you back, doing extra work around the house and earning an agreed-upon wage to repay you. Overcorrection also may be appropriate in some cases. Your child must replace an object taken with one of higher value.

• **Have children prove the source of new possessions.** If anything new shows up in your children's possession, they must be able to prove where it came from. If they say they bought it, they must have a receipt. If they say they borrowed it from a friend, verify it yourself.

• **Have unannounced searches for chronic stealers.** Periodic unannounced room searches can be a deterrent. Don't do this behind their back, but do choose an unexpected time. You want the children to be present so they'll know you're not looking into private things such as a diary, but only for items that don't belong to them.

Conflicts of Values and Opinions

Hard-to-handle children and their parents often disagree, and they may try to convince each other that one is right and the other is wrong. Whenever you're discussing opinions with your child, remember that opinions are just that—opinions. It's important for us to respect our children's ideas, even when we may not agree. Say, "You have a right to your opinion," or "We can agree to disagree about that." Differences of opinion on minor issues (such as which baseball team is the best) aren't too upsetting. But we become concerned when our children's opinions lead to behaviors that may not be in their best interest. Here are some common areas where the values of parents and children conflict.

Clothing and Fashion

In situations involving tastes and preferences, we can usually let children follow their own inclinations without making an issue of

it. Allowing children to pick their own clothes teaches them how to make decisions. If their clothes don't look right, other children will let them know. Here are some guidelines for dealing with potential conflicts:

• **Offer opinions if your child asks.** But remember—it's simply an opinion, not a matter of right or wrong.

• **Offer opinions respectfully.** Often it's okay to give an opinion even if your child hasn't asked. Just do so respectfully. Say, "You might be cold if you wear only a sweater to school." Then let natural or logical consequences occur.

• **Pull rank when you feel strongly.** Special occasions (such as going to a religious service, wedding, or funeral) may call for certain types of clothing. Say, "It's okay for you to wear whatever you wish to school or when you're with your friends, but when we go to church, I need you to dress up." In other words, acknowledge that this is your problem by saying, "I need." You don't need to insult your child's taste. Only press the fashion issue in circumstances where your child will accompany you or some other significant adult, and only if the occasion clearly demands a more traditional form of dress.

Choosing Friendships

Letting a child choose what to wear is one thing, but choosing friends and activities is another. If your child invests in a friendship that leads to trouble, explain your concerns. Ask that your child respectfully listen, because you're not going to keep talking about it. No one responds well to nagging, and hard-to-handle kids may become even more resistant the more they're hassled. Here are some guidelines:

• **Tell your child specifically how you feel the friendship is creating problems.** For example, if your child gets into trouble at school with the friend, suggest that your child consider whether

these complications are worth it. Sometimes you can acknowledge that the friendship has some positive aspects. But do help your child resist being led by children whose behaviors cause difficulties. Encourage positive self-talk and practicing responses to problems.

• **Try to trust your child's judgment.** Relationships in childhood tend to come and go, and some friendships pass naturally without your making a big deal of them. Only when a friend is clearly influencing your child in matters of great importance, such as skipping school or stealing, should you actively intervene on the relationship.

• **Recognize when children get caught in a relationship.** Set strong limits when your child is frequently drawn into trouble by another child or becomes upset by a friend's actions. Children sometimes seem incapable of cutting off an unhealthy relationship. Allow your child to spend only short periods of time with the friend, and only when responsible adults are present. If the relationship causes extreme problems, cut the contacts entirely, although this would be a last resort.

Harmful Behaviors

Take a firmer stand on harmful behaviors that may have immediate, potentially dangerous consequences for children: smoking, drinking alcohol, or using other drugs. Even children age 12 and younger report using these substances. Research shows a clear relationship between substance use and other illegal activities. Hard-to-handle young people, who are intense and likely to resist societal rules, are at even greater risk for using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

The best way parents can exercise some control over substance use is to monitor their children's activities. Know where your children are and who they are with. Hard-to-handle children resist parents on this subject, so be prepared for negative reactions. Actively listening, but standing firm, is your best response.

You won't be able to control all access to alcohol and other drugs simply by monitoring. Many young people, especially hard-to-handle ones, will probably try to outsmart you, and they'll succeed at times. You can be prepared by being aware of the signs of substance use" (see page 171).

Tobacco Use

- **Be direct.** Clearly state your values and the health and legal implications of underage smoking and tobacco chewing.
- **Let children suffer the consequences for tobacco use.** Most states prohibit the sale of cigarettes to minors. Let your children know that if they get arrested for purchasing cigarettes, you won't intervene. Likewise, if your child gets caught with cigarettes at school, let your child suffer the school's consequence without interfering.
- **Emphasize the immediate problems associated with smoking.** Odors, shortness of breath, coughing, impaired athletic performance, the expense, and cigarette burns hit home more for kids than health problems that might occur years down the road.
- **Make it clear you won't allow smoking in your presence, in your home, or on your property.** Also be clear that if you see cigarettes lying around, you'll throw them away. Tell your children that you don't want them to smoke, and they do so without your permission.
- **You can't win if your children are determined to smoke.** Don't follow them around 24 hours a day and yank cigarettes out of their hands.

Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Hard-to-handle children often resist their parents' expectations on alcohol and other drug use. Some children use these substances no matter what we say or do. If you think your child is hiding drugs

or alcohol, conduct random, surprise room searches with your child present.

Monitoring the situation is important so you can intervene when substances affect your child's health and safety, school work, family relationships, and other important areas of life. When substance use leads to significant problems, parents need to take stronger action. In such circumstances, take your child to a counselor who has expertise in alcohol or other drug abuse. Check your local Yellow Pages under "Alcoholism Information" or "Drug Treatment." Some battles *are* worth fighting.

Signs of Alcohol Use

- Relaxed behavior and increased lack of self-control
- Confusion and lack of concentration
- Staggering, general lack of coordination, slurred speech
- Drowsiness and sleep
- Increase in aggressive and irritable behavior
- Unexplained physical symptoms, such as nausea and vomiting; cold, clammy skin; shallow breathing; and weak, rapid pulse. (These are signs of overdose. Call 911.)

Signs of Marijuana Use

- Relaxation, talkativeness, and increased lack of self-control
- Unexplained euphoria and mood swings
- Loss of concentration
- Lack of coordination
- Increased heart rate, appetite, and dryness of mouth
- A general mellow, don't-care attitude
- Unexplained excessive fatigue, suspiciousness, delusions, and hallucinations. (These are signs of overdose. Call 911.)

A few final words about conflicts: No matter how much you may disagree with your child, your child still needs your love and support. It's often easy to forget this with the strong-willed kid who tests limits in order to gain a sense of control and independence.

So don't forget the freebies—the freely given love and respect. Listen to your children's opinions, spend positive time with them, smile, and show support. Our positive actions can help sustain the relationship through difficult times.

Notes:

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2. AAP Committee on Communications. (1995). "Children, Adolescents, and Television." *Pediatrics*, 96 (4), 786–89.

3. Erickson, M.T. (1998). *Behavior Disorders of Children and Adolescents*, third edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

4. Spence, W.R. (1995). *Substance Abuse Identification Guide*. Waco, TX: Health Edco.

CHAPTER 11

Encouraging Sibling and Peer Relationships

Most hard-to-handle children have problems getting along with other children. That's because they have a strong need for attention and control, the same issues that affect their relationship with their parents.

Parents play a major role in helping young people develop successful relationships. We can teach our hard-to-handle children

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how to get along with their brothers and sisters as well as their friends and classmates. These relationships have a profound influence on children's lives, and the guidance we provide can help them form and maintain supportive relationships.

Getting Along with Brothers and Sisters

Rivalry is built into most sibling relationships. Children naturally compete for parental love and affection, and there is usually no way around this completely. No matter what you do, children in the household will feel some injustices. In other words, you can never truly be fair from the child's point of view. In fact, it's best that parents avoid what childrearing experts Steve and Marianne Garber and Robyn Spizman call the "fairness trap." It's simply unrealistic that you can—or should—do the same thing for each child in the family at the same time.

Fairness does not involve treating everyone equally. Instead, it's about treating everyone according to her or his needs at the time. Just because one child needs new shoes doesn't mean you buy new shoes for all your children, even though they may beg. You can listen to their complaints, but you don't have to comply.

Conflict among siblings is affected by many factors—age differences, personality and temperament, birth order, and gender. Rivalry typically is greatest from the older to the next youngest child, because older children may feel displaced when younger siblings arrive.

Many factors may affect sibling relationships, but here are some general guidelines for handling sibling problems.

Watch your own interactions with your children. Not only is it impossible to treat hard-to-handle children and their siblings the same, it's also impossible not to compare your children in your own mind. Hard-to-handle children often measure unfavorably against their more easygoing siblings. Difficult children often see their parents as preferring a sibling, which increases the rivalry.

And siblings often resent the attention a hard-to-handle brother or sister attracts. Be careful not to add to the competitive atmosphere. Never say, "Why can't you act like your brother? He never gets in trouble!" That only adds fuel to what may already be a steady blaze.

Encourage your children's individual talents and interests. While it would be more convenient for us if all our children had the same extracurricular activities, this often increases sibling competition, providing more opportunities for conflict. Try to help your children develop their own special activities.

Don't get unnecessarily caught up in children's arguments. When we hear children arguing, it's tempting to step in to fix the problem—especially when one child comes to tell on the other. Being an effective judge and jury is an impossible, thankless job; the tales told by each child usually differ dramatically. The best stance is to say, "I'm sorry you aren't getting along, but I don't think there's much I can do, since you both have different ideas about what happened. I wasn't there. I hope you can work things out yourselves."

When you let children work out problems themselves, the process doesn't have to unduly affect you. Any time arguing persists and the volume builds, enforce a 10-minute cooling down period, sending each child to a different part of the home. Be clear that this is time to cool off, not time out. Children are free to play and settle themselves down.

Help children develop more effective ways of expressing conflict. Children can use I-messages ("I feel hurt and frustrated when you won't let me play"), or say, "You've got a right to your opinion," or "We can agree to disagree about that." There's also the tried-and-true method of walking away, although this level of self-control is too sophisticated for many children, especially if they're young. But you can work on it with your children, knowing that maturity may improve their skills.

Recognize that children sometimes argue for sport. Even though they get angry, many will tell you later they also enjoyed

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sparring. Remember, you don't have to be the audience for this show; you can direct children to go to another part of the house or outside to continue their performance.

Deal directly with verbal and physical aggression. Arguing is one thing, but strong name-calling, insults, and physical aggression are another. Be clear that hitting in self-defense is not allowed—unless a child is truly cornered and has no other way out. Teach your children that the best defense is to walk away or to stand up for themselves nonaggressively. (See page 145.)

Pay close attention to angry and hurtful words as well as physical anger. Although physical aggression is harmful, it usually ends quickly. Insulting words may echo in a child's mind for a long time. Vicious verbal attacks can undermine children's feelings about themselves as well as their relationships with their brother or sister. Define what types of things children can say to each other when they are angry and what is not acceptable. If you use a home-economy program (see chapter 8), deduct points for inappropriate expressions of anger. For younger children, give an immediate 15-minute time out.

Spend individual time with each child. A hard-to-handle child's behavior eats up a lot of your time and energy, and other children may feel neglected. Resentments toward the hard-to-handle sibling sometimes fester. Although it can be difficult to arrange, it's important to have positive one-to-one time with each of your children. Your other children also need nurturing and support, and the attention you give them lets difficult children know that their behavior doesn't control everything that goes on in the family.

If siblings angrily complain about the difficult child during your one-to-one time, listen actively, letting them know that you understand their frustrations. Explain that you are doing everything you can, and you realize how difficult the situation is. Supporting your nonproblem children usually helps them through difficult times with a hard-to-handle brother or sister.

Reinforce sibling cooperation. Even the most difficult sibling relationships aren't rife with conflict all of the time. Sometimes

children play nicely together and even cooperate on projects. Let them know when you notice this. If the relationship between siblings has been strongly problematic, consider awarding points on the home-economy program for being cooperative.

Remember that sharing is difficult for many hard-to-handle children. Children shouldn't be required to share everything they have with other family members. Parents have possessions that are hands-off to children and other adults in the family, and children should have some belongings that are theirs alone. Problems can arise when children own things jointly—such as a television, telephone, or video game system. When conflicts erupt over sharing these items, use the problem-solving technique outlined in chapter 9 (see pages 147–149) to work out an equitable plan. If this doesn't help, remove the item from use for two days before giving children the opportunity to try to work things out again. Any time children persist in arguing over these items, remove them for another two days.

Encourage cooperation by setting up opportunities for the family to work together. For example, family members can do chores together. Rather than sending kids off to clean their rooms on their own, some families like it when everyone works together in one room. When one room is clean, move on to the next. After chores are finished, reward yourselves as a family by going out for pizza or doing some other favorite activity.

Avoid a perpetrator-and-victim mentality. When a hard-to-handle child acts aggressively toward a sibling, it's easy to see the sibling as the victim. Siblings, however, sometimes deliberately incite a hard-to-handle child. Even in relationships between difficult children and their siblings, all children may contribute to a conflict, not just one. Don't assume that the difficult child is always the guilty one and the sibling innocent. Use the same types of feedback with both children.

But do monitor the relationship carefully to be sure that a sibling isn't abused, either psychologically or physically. If conflicts escalate to a level that seems abusive, seek professional help.

Building Friendships

Peer relationships for hard-to-handle children often are difficult, and parents can be a tremendous help in making these relationships better. Once children enter school, you won't be able to observe directly what's happening between your children and their peers. But you can help your children develop peer relationships when they're in your home or places where other adults can give you feedback about their behavior.

Sometimes peers, other parents, and teachers will say your difficult child is a model citizen. When you hear such reports, you may wonder if they really mean *your* child. Yet not all hard-to-handle children carry their difficult behaviors with them away from home. Children may act differently in different circumstances.

Here are some general guidelines for helping hard-to-handle children get along better with their peers.

Make opportunities for your child to interact with peers when you're around. Invite neighborhood children to play at your home so you can monitor how the kids interact. Before the other children arrive, talk with your hard-to-handle child about behaviors you'll be looking for. Emphasize what you'd like your child to do more—sharing, talking to friends in a pleasant voice, and using good manners. Say that every time you hear or see one of these cooperative behaviors, you'll give your child a point. If your child earns 10 points, he or she can stay up later that evening. If you're using a home-economy program, include these behaviors on your chart (see chapter 8). When you notice children being cooperative, provide positive social feedback. Say, "I like the way you guys are getting along. Thank you very much."

Encourage new friendships. Help your child identify possible new friends from school or an extracurricular activity. Invite one of these children over for a brief, adult-monitored activity, rather than an afternoon or full day of free play. Children have more conflicts with each other when they're left alone too long. In helping your child form a new friendship, let it progress in stages.

Start with activities like going to a park, then arrange for the child to share a meal with your family, perhaps accompanied by her or his parents. Then let the child visit your home. As the friendship develops, children can spend longer and less-structured time together. It's helpful to give positive feedback to both children about their appropriate behavior with each other.

Ask other adults about your child's behavior. When your child is invited to another child's house, talk together about the rules of social behavior as specifically as possible. Explain that you'll check with the other parent to see how things went. If your child is involved in a supervised after-school activity, such as dance, scouting, or sports, ask the adult leaders about your child's behavior. Children need to know that the same behavior standards apply whether you're there or not.

Model and teach social skills. Exercising good manners with your children increases the likelihood that they'll be polite in their relationships with others. Lighthearted practice sessions for teaching social skills can be helpful. For example, you and your child can practice saying please and thank you to each other, using I-messages when irritated with a peer, and walking away or using physical assertiveness rather than aggression. You don't want to overdo this, and if your child resists, offer an incentive to encourage your child to take advantage of these training sessions.

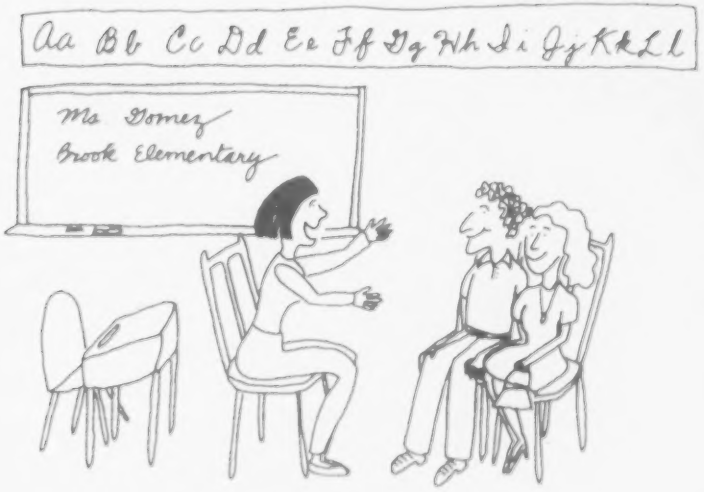
Helping hard-to-handle children with sibling and peer relationships is important. Siblings often outlive us, and peers become more important as children grow older. Children who have good relationships with their peers often have fewer difficulties with relationships in adulthood. We can teach our children ways to develop positive relationships while they are young.

Notes:

1. Garber, S.W., M.D. Garber & R.F. Spizman. (1992). *Good Behavior Made Easy Handbook*. Gladstonbury, CT: Great Paul Publishing Co.

CHAPTER 12

Helping Your Child Succeed at School



Not surprisingly, hard-to-handle behavior accompanies many children to school. While you can't control your children's behavior at school, you can influence it in positive ways. You can set realistic expectations, support your children's efforts, establish effective communication with the teacher, and deal appropriately with

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homework. All of these things will help ensure your child has more successful school experiences.

Set Realistic Expectations

When children have a history of acting up in school, we can't expect them to turn around overnight, no matter how much support we provide. Old habits die hard, so patience is essential. When we talk to our child about disruptive behavior at school, we may be tempted to say, "I want you to stop getting in trouble at school." But that doesn't work. Not only are we asking our child to change radically, but we're being vague.

We need to set specific, reasonable goals for our child's behavior, rather than attempt to work on everything at once. If a child talks too much, sasses the teacher, pushes other kids around, and calls kids names, work first on the most troublesome behaviors: sassing the teacher and pushing other kids.

Other Issues Affecting School Success

How children act in school can be affected by attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a learning disability, or other developmental problems. If you suspect your child has a problem that makes learning difficult, ask your child's school for an assessment referral.

Support Children's Efforts

Once you set clear expectations, support your child's efforts toward change. Remember, forming new behavior patterns take time. Give your child credit for movement toward the goal, even if the results aren't perfect. Just as you supported your child's efforts in learning to walk, you can encourage his or her efforts in changing behavior at school one step at a time.

Establish Effective Communication with Teachers

Regular communication with your child's teacher or teachers is an essential part of developing reasonable behavior expectations. Good communication can be difficult to develop and maintain, especially as our children grow older and have more teachers during a school day. And because a teacher's school day is occupied teaching classes and attending to students' needs, just getting in touch can be a challenge. But there's no substitute for effective communication, and it usually pays off for everyone—you, your child, your child's classmates, and the teacher.

Don't wait for the teacher to make the first contact; take the initiative yourself, especially if your child has a history of difficult behavior in school. Teachers sometimes try to work on a behavior problem for weeks or even months before bringing parents into the process. By then, the teacher may be frustrated with the child, and the child may be frustrated with the teacher. Initial problems become stronger habits the longer they go on. Teachers like to know that they don't have to work on problems alone.

If your child is hard-to-handle, try to connect with your child's teacher two weeks into the academic year. This gives the teacher time to get to know your child and work with any initial behavior problems. It also gives your child some time to adjust to a new classroom with a new set of expectations and rules.

Make your initial contact by phone or in writing rather than in person. The best time to reach a teacher is usually 10 or 15 minutes after school is out for the day; you can catch the teacher after class lets out but before he or she heads off to a meeting or home for the day. If you decide to write a note, email it or drop it off yourself rather than depending on your child to deliver it.

If you're calling on the phone, be sure to ask the teacher if it's convenient to talk, and set an appointment for a phone conference if you need to. If you write a note or leave a message, include your phone numbers, times you can be reached, and your mailing address or email address. It's also a good idea to say something

like, "I look forward to hearing from you by Friday." (Pick a school day about five days from when you first call or send a note.)

When you do talk with your child's teacher, start off open-ended and general: "I know classes are in full swing now, and I wanted to find out how things are going for Jennifer. What's going okay and what difficulties, if any, is she having with her school work or behavior?" If you hear anything that suggests the teacher is concerned, schedule a conference. After school often works best, but some teachers have periods during the day when they can arrange meetings; conferences before school sometimes work, but these can be rushed and interrupted by children coming into the classroom.

Both parents should attend the meeting if possible. Not only does this send a message that everyone is interested in helping the child and the teacher, but it also makes sure everyone involved hears the same message. Teachers feel more supported when two parents come, and this helps them maintain their own efforts on behalf of the child. In addition, fathers usually have far less contact with teachers, and when they attend a conference, some teachers pay more attention.

When you meet with a teacher, thank him or her for seeing you and ask about the teachers concerns. Take notes and actively listen before asking questions or making comments. It can be tough to hear a teacher's concerns about your child, but when you listen to the teachers observations respectfully, he or she is more likely to see you as an ally. The teacher will then listen to you and take you and your child's needs more seriously. Remember, you both have the same goal: helping your child succeed at school.

Once you've discussed your concerns, find out what the teacher is doing to work with the difficulties and how you can help. Most teachers attempt to work with the hard-to-handle child using their classroom or school guidelines, but especially early in the school year, these methods may not have had enough time to work yet. Share your experiences with the teacher. Let him or her know about techniques you've used that required time before you could see benefits. Teachers can usually adapt methods you're using, such as positive social feedback and effective statements of

disapproval, to their classroom. Also let the teacher know what doesn't work with your child's personality. For example, "If he's yelled at, he either shuts down or talks back." But whatever you do, support any reasonable efforts the teacher is making. Most teachers want to work with parents to resolve any problems.

Ongoing Communication Through Behavior Rating Forms

Sometimes one conference can set the stage for improvement, as long as you stay in touch with the teacher by phone or in notes. But with many hard-to-handle kids, more direct, ongoing parental involvement is needed for them to succeed at school. Their parents and teachers need regular written communication, daily at the beginning. Set up another conference to identify specific behaviors you want to help your child with. You can use a behavior rating form like the one page 186 to help track your child's behavior at school.

When using a rating form, focus on only three or four behaviors at a time. Doing more may be overwhelming and confusing to everyone—the teacher, your child, and you. Rate what you want clearly, briefly, and in positive terms. Specify what the child *should* do rather than what *not* to do. For example, instead of "Doesn't talk out loud in class," write "Raises hand before speaking." You can also include behaviors associated with academic problems, for example, "Completes in-class assignments."

Once you've identified the behaviors you'd like your child to work on, ask the teacher to rate the child each day. This approach works best for children in elementary school when a child has one or two teachers. Once children are in middle school, daily ratings by multiple teachers can be difficult to collect and track. Weekly ratings may be the best you can do. If a child is having problems with only one or two teachers, they may be willing to complete daily forms while the other teachers fill them out weekly.

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Behavior Rating Form

Name: _____ Date: _____

Desired Behavior:	Rating:
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
TOTAL POINTS →	

Rating: 5 = Doing very well
4 = Doing well
3 = Doing okay
2 = A problem
1 = A big problem

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Teacher Signature: _____

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Ideally, your child's teacher would take a few moments after class to give the child his or her ratings and briefly explain why the child received them. If the teacher has enough time and your child's problems occur often, two or more ratings a day for each behavior is helpful. Remember, getting frequent feedback helps kids change more quickly.

Occasionally teachers resist filling out behavior rating forms. These forms do take time, and teachers juggling many priorities may have difficulty remembering to fill them out during a busy school day. If a teacher seems reluctant, point out the benefits. By giving your child consistent feedback through the behavior rating form, the teacher can reduce the time spent dealing with your child's behavior problems in class. Let the teacher know you're using similar methods at home, and that in using a behavior rating form at school you'll be supporting each other's efforts to help your child improve. After all, you're on the same side. Some teachers who are hesitant to take on the added burden may respond better if you agree to try it for a set period of time, perhaps a month or six weeks.

The teacher isn't the only one who has to make a commitment to use these forms effectively. Before you go ahead with the plan, you'll need to decide how to reward your child for positive behavior. Concrete rewards, such as a trip to the treasure box, work well.

First, decide how many points your child must earn to get a reward. Figure out the maximum points your child could earn. For example, if you're working on four behaviors and each earns up to 5 points, your child could earn up to 20 points.

You want to make sure that your child gets some kind of reward for his or her efforts, so set the beginning reward threshold at half the possible points (10, in this case). Make it clear to your child that this is where you'll *start*. As children get better at handling their behavior, they'll be ready to earn more points in order to get a reward.

In explaining the system to your child, say something like, "You can earn treats for controlling some of your behavior at school. If you earn enough points during the day, you'll get a prize. If you do very, very well, you can get 20 points each day. But I

know it would be hard for you to earn 20 points right now, so we'll start by giving you a prize for earning 10 points. As you get more practice and earning 10 points becomes easy, you'll be ready to earn more points—12, then 14, then 16—to get a reward. Any day you earn all 20 points, you'll get to pick two prizes. If you earn less than 10 points, there's no prize that day."

When the rating sheet comes home, sit with your child and go through each item. If your child earns at least a 3, comment favorably: "I see you did okay on raising your hand today." Be more enthusiastic when your child earns a 4 or 5. Don't discuss each behavior, but move on to the next item. If your child receives a 1 or 2, comment matter-of-factly: "It looks like raising your hand was a big problem today." Don't probe, complain, or lecture. If your child disputes a rating, listen briefly and sympathetically, but move on.

Total the points. Look at your child, smile, and say with enthusiasm, "Well, you earned 12 points today! Congratulations, you get a trip to the treasure box!" If your child doesn't earn enough points, calmly say, "I'm sorry you earned only 8 points today, so there's no prize box. I hope things go better tomorrow." Then end the discussion. Deal with negative comments from your child by listening actively, but briefly. This is your child's problem, and you can be understanding. But if your child continues to be intense, walk away. Discuss any problems your child had that day only after he or she has settled down. Talk to your child about taking some of the techniques he or she has been learning at home into school, such as deep breathing and self-talk.

What if your child rarely earns even the minimum points in the beginning and seldom or never gets a treat? If this goes on for more than a week, lower the starting point requirement. If your child never receives a reward, it can't serve as encouragement. Say, "I know you've had a hard time earning points and you've been upset about it. I think we probably asked you to do more than you're able to right now. So let's try earning at least 8 points to begin with, and we'll build back up to 10."

Sometimes a child does well in most areas but has one behavior that persistently remains at 1 or 2 points. If your child can still

earn enough points to get a prize by doing well in other areas, he or she might not be motivated to increase the other points. In this situation, say, "You know, you've been doing well in raising your hand, but you're still having trouble keeping your hands to yourself. You'll still get your prize if you earn the points needed. But if you get a 1 or 2 in keeping your hands to yourself, you'll have to go to bed early." Some kids require negative feedback to improve their behavior. But keep the emphasis on the positives.

When Your Child Has Problems with a Teacher

Sometimes hard-to-handle children complain about a teacher. When this happens, actively listen, then help your child think about what he or she could do differently to help the situation.

If you feel your child is being put down and intimidated, however, set up a conference with the teacher. It's important to take your child seriously and not assume that a teacher is always right and your child wrong.

When you meet with the teacher, simply state what your child has told you, trying to keep a neutral tone of voice. For example, "I'm concerned because Jennifer said you've called her lazy in front of the rest of the class. She feels discouraged and upset by this." Then stop talking, actively listen, and see what happens.

Sometimes teachers become so frustrated with a student that they talk disrespectfully about the child, even to the child's parents. This is never appropriate, and you need to address the issue right away. Establish firm eye contact and say something like, "I know you're frustrated about Jennifer's behavior, and I understand that. But I do not accept your disrespect toward my child." Then stop, and see what happens. Most of the time, assertive statements delivered firmly and politely remedy the problem and prevent the encounter from degenerating further.

Keep your cool and treat the teacher with courtesy, even if it's difficult. If the teacher becomes angry, you can say, "I won't continue

this meeting unless we can deal with each other respectfully, even when we disagree."

If that doesn't settle things down, say, "It's clear we need help communicating about my child. I'm going to schedule a meeting for us with the principal. When is a good time?" Explain that you'll schedule a meeting and ask the teacher to attend.

Fortunately, these negative encounters are rare. Most teachers want to assist children with their difficulties, and they usually respond well when they see that parents are trying to help their child. Everyone benefits when parents and teachers work together.

Help with Homework

Homework is important because children need time outside of school to review and practice lessons and to develop their thinking skills. It's the rare child who always enjoys homework, but most kids manage to do it. Hard-to-handle children, however, frequently resist doing their homework, and it can become a source of conflict. Here are some simple ways you can help:

Listen to your child. Listen actively and respond, "I know it makes you mad to have to do homework, especially since you've been in school all day and want to do other things now."

Create a space for homework. You may need to experiment to find a homework spot. Some kids work well in the relative isolation of their own rooms, while others feel banished or become distracted. It's best for the child to work away from the center of activity; for example, the kitchen table while dinner is being prepared is not the best choice. Some children complete homework successfully while listening to music or watching television. Let academic performance be your guide. If children work to their potential while watching television, that's fine. If not, set limits.

Set a regular time for homework. There is no magic time for doing homework. Some children do best right after school, others just before dinner, and others in the evening. Pick a time and

experiment with it for at least two weeks. If you and your child feel it's not working out, try another time.

Help your child develop a homework habit. Sometimes homework becomes a problem because it's unpredictable. Children may have 15 minutes of homework one day, none the next, and an hour the next. Psychologist Linda Sonna suggests that some children do best if they know that on Monday through Thursday, they'll have organized learning activities.* Making homework a consistent activity from early on may help children accept homework as part of their routine.

Establish a regular afternoon or evening learning time for your children: a half hour in elementary school (grades one through five), an hour or more in middle school (grades six through eight). If children have homework, they can do it during the learning time. If they don't have homework, you direct the learning time. This can be as informal as reading books that interest them or watching an educational video and discussing what they've learned. Although children may resist the idea at first, they may enjoy the process once it becomes part of their routine. Don't expect them to admit it, however.

Check It Out

How to Do Homework Without Throwing Up written and illustrated by Trevor Romain (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1996). Offers serious suggestions delivered with wit and humor. Ages 8 to 13.

How to Help Your Child with Homework: Every Caring Parent's Guide to Encouraging Good Study Habits and Ending the Homework Wars by Marguerite C. Radencich, Ph.D., and Jeanne Shay Schumm, Ph.D. (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1997). With hundreds of ideas for helping children in all subject areas, this book helps parents promote school success.

Playing Smart: A Parent's Guide to Enriching, Offbeat Learning Activities for Ages 4–14 by Susan K. Perry (Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1990). Activity ideas for photography, cooking, journal-keeping, and more. Most activities require little or no preparation and can be done at home or close to home.

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Help your child keep track of homework. Sometimes kids tell you they have no homework when they do. Or they may write the assignment down incompletely or illegibly. Ask your child's teacher what he or she does to help kids keep track of their assignments, and try to help your child use that system. If the teacher doesn't have a formal system, you can give your child a small notebook to record assignments. Make your child responsible for writing down assignments and getting the teacher to check and initial it to make sure your child knows what to do. If there is no homework, the teacher indicates so on the sheet. Your child must bring the notebook home each day. If your child doesn't, or forgets to ask the teacher to initial it, you can give a fine.

Help children understand assignments. Read through the instructions with your child, and be on hand to help answer your child's questions. Teachers don't always give assignments clearly, and children may not understand what they're supposed to do. Help your child learn to ask questions in class to make sure the assignment is clear before coming home.

Help your child decide what to do first. Children should do the most boring or the most difficult tasks first. Put books and other assignments out of sight so that children can focus on one task at a time.

Help your child develop independent working skills. Be available to answer questions and help your child understand the material, but don't sit with your child through the homework period. Your constant presence tied to what's often an unpleasant task increases the likelihood that you'll become irritated with each other. And negative emotions only prolong the agony.

Create smaller assignments. If your child can't do an entire assignment independently, break the task into smaller pieces. Even adults can become overwhelmed by a big job, but smaller chunks seem more manageable. For example, instead of having your child tackle 30 math problems, say, "Do five problems and come show

me." Then walk away. When your child brings the problems, praise your child's effort: "Thanks for working on those. Now do five more and then show me."

Respect your child's work. It's not your job to grade your child's homework. If you happen to see an error, point it out and encourage your child to correct it. But for routine homework, don't battle. Allow your child to take homework to school uncorrected. Teachers need to see what a child is having trouble with. If you do most of the homework and it seems perfect, the teacher may assume the child understands the material better than he or she actually does.

Set limits on your involvement. Sometimes children fiddle with homework over a period of hours. If you feel you're on call for the entire evening, you can set limits. Agree to be available until a certain time, and after that your child is on his or her own. You can make an exception when a child has a lot of homework that realistically takes a long time. Otherwise, let children handle it and deal with the teacher about any incomplete work.

Set limits on your child's time. Parkinson's Law says "Work expands to fill the time allowed for it." If you have four hours to do something, it may take that long, but if you have just one hour, it may take only an hour. To help your child work more efficiently, you might set a time, such as 8:00 P.M., for all homework to be done. If your child still hasn't finished, he or she must stop. When this happens, limit evening privileges so children don't dawdle in hopes of waiting you out so they can watch TV.

Encourage children to start projects right away. Like many adults, children often wait until the last minute to tackle an assignment. It's important to find out about special projects in advance, which is another reason for regular teacher-parent communication. Many schools have homework lines that parents can call to get updates on class activities. Talk with your child's teacher to find out about any special projects. You can then help your child

break the project down into steps. Have your child work on small bits each night. Your role is to guide, help get materials such as library books, and support your child's effort. Resist the temptation to rescue your child at the last minute by taking emergency library trips or staying up into the wee hours to type a project. Let your child turn in a project late and take the consequences. Remember, learning comes through consequences.

Whether helping your child with homework or improving behavior at school, take every opportunity to offer encouragement. Give positive feedback generously. Encouraging words and honest praise can motivate children to continue or increase their efforts.

Notes:

1. Sonna, L.A. (1990). *The Homework Solution*. Charlotte, VT: Williamson Publishing.

A Final Word

In reading this book, you've learned a lot about hard-to-handle behaviors, their possible causes, and many strategies for dealing with them. Deciding which methods to use in different circumstances may seem confusing, or maybe it's difficult to find the time to start working out an effective way to deal with your hard-to-handle kid. You might be tempted to keep doing what you've always done because you're used to it, and you know what to expect.

This is understandable, but you've already made a good start, and you can begin making small changes to improve your situation and your relationship with your child.

First, don't try to work on everything at once. Concentrate on only two or three problems in the beginning, and move on to others once these are under better control. Also focus on trying just two new strategies at a time, such as giving more effective directions, providing more positive social feedback, or experimenting with one form of negative feedback. Whatever strategies you choose, stick with them for a couple of weeks before adding another skill to your repertoire or trying something else instead.

Second, remember that authoritative parenting works. The combination of nurturing and supporting children along with structuring and directing their behaviors provides the promise of helping children change their difficult behaviors, whether at home or at other places. Balancing support with direction is extremely effective for all children, and research shows that this kind of parenting approach works. The good news is, hard-to-handle behavior can be *helped*.

While learning and practicing new methods of feedback and discipline take time and effort in the short run, they will demand less of you over the long run. Once you've mastered a technique, you'll feel more comfortable using it with your child. Not only will you find yourself dealing with your children's behavior more effectively, you'll also enjoy your relationship with them more.

You aren't alone in having a hard-to-handle child, although it may feel like that from time to time. Other parents go through similar struggles, and you don't need to face the problem in isolation. Parenting is always difficult, and some children are more difficult to parent than others. Don't be afraid to ask for help, and please don't wait for problems to become serious before reaching out.

Seeking help through books, family health professionals, support from other parents, or any combination of these efforts, you can find the support you need to meet the challenges of raising a hard-to-handle kid. Practice and persistence in applying effective parenting techniques helps. It's like the old joke of the visitor to New York City who asked a bystander, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The bystander replied, "Practice. Practice. Practice." No matter what you try, everyone will gain from your efforts—you, your child, and the other important people in your child's life. Everyone wins.

Resources

Books for Parents

A to Z Guide to Your Child's Behavior by David Mrazek and William Carrison (New York: Perigee Books, 1993)

Between Parent and Child by Haim G. Ginott (New York: Avon Books, 1961)

Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5 by Steven Shelov and Robert Hamneman (Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1993)

Child and Adolescent Development by Kelvin Seifert (New York: Houghton Millin, 1987)

Children: The Challenge by Rudolf Dreikurs (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1964)

The Difficult Child, revised edition, by Stanley Turecki (New York: Bantam Books, 1989)

Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care, sixth edition, by Benjamin Spock et al. (New York: Pocket Books, 1992)

Families by Gerald R. Patterson (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1975)

Gifts Differing by Isabel B. Myers (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980)

Good Behavior Made Easy Handbook by Stephen W. Garber, Marianne D. Garber, and Robyn Spizman (Gladstonbury, CT: Great Paul Publishing Co., 1992)

Home Token Economy by Jack R. Alvord (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1973)

The Homework Solution by Linda A. Sonna (Charlotte, VT: Williamson Publishing Co., 1990)

How to Help Children with Common Problems by Charles E. Schaefer and Howard L. Millman (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981)

How to Really Love Your Child by Ross Campbell (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977)

Living with Children, revised, by Gerald R. Patteson (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1976)

Parent Effectiveness Training by Thomas Gordon (New York: Plume, 1975)

Parenting, third edition, by Louise F. Guerney (State College, PA: Ideals, 1988)

Parenting the Strong-Willed Child by Rex Forehand and Nicholas Long (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1996)

The Parent's Handbook (STEP) by Don C. Dinkmeyer and Gary D. McKay (Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, 1997)

Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types, third edition, by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis Books, 1978).

Positive Discipline A-Z by Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott, and H. Stephen Glenn (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1993).

Preventive Parenting With Love, Encouragement, and Limits: The Preschool Years by Thomas J. Dishion and Scot G. Patterson (Eugene, OR: Castalia Publishing Co., 1996).

A Promise Is a Promise by Robert Munsch and Michael Kusugak (New York: Annick Press, 1988).

Raising Good Children: From Birth Through the Teenage Years by Thomas Lickona (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).

Ready, Set...R.E.L.A.X. by Jeffrey S. Allen and Roger J. Klein (Watertown, WI: Inner Coaching, 1996).

The Relaxation Response by Herbert Benson (New York: William Morrow, 1975).

School-Home Notes: Promoting Children's Classroom Success by Mary Lou Kelley (New York: Guilford Press, 1990).

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Fireside Books, 1989).

Substance Abuse Identification Guide by W. R. Spence (Waco, TX: Health Edco, 1995).

Taking Charge of ADHD by Russell A. Barkley (New York: Guilford Press, 1995).

Taming the Dragon in Your Child by Meg Eastman (New York: John Wiley, 1994).

Teaching Your Children Values by Linda Eyre and Richard Eyre (New York: Fireside, 1993).

Books for Children

The Berenstain Bears and the Truth by Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain (New York: Random House, 1983).

The Complete Tales by Beatrix Potter (London: Penguin Group, 1989).

The Jester Has Lost His Jingle by David Saltzman (Palo Verdes Estates, CA: The Jester Company, 1995).

Love You Forever by Robert Munsch (Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly Books, 1986).

Ramona the Brave by Beverly Cleary (New York: Avon Books, 1985).

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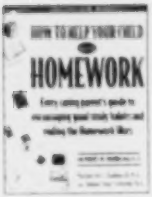

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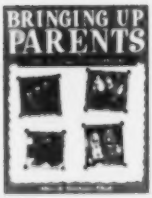

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